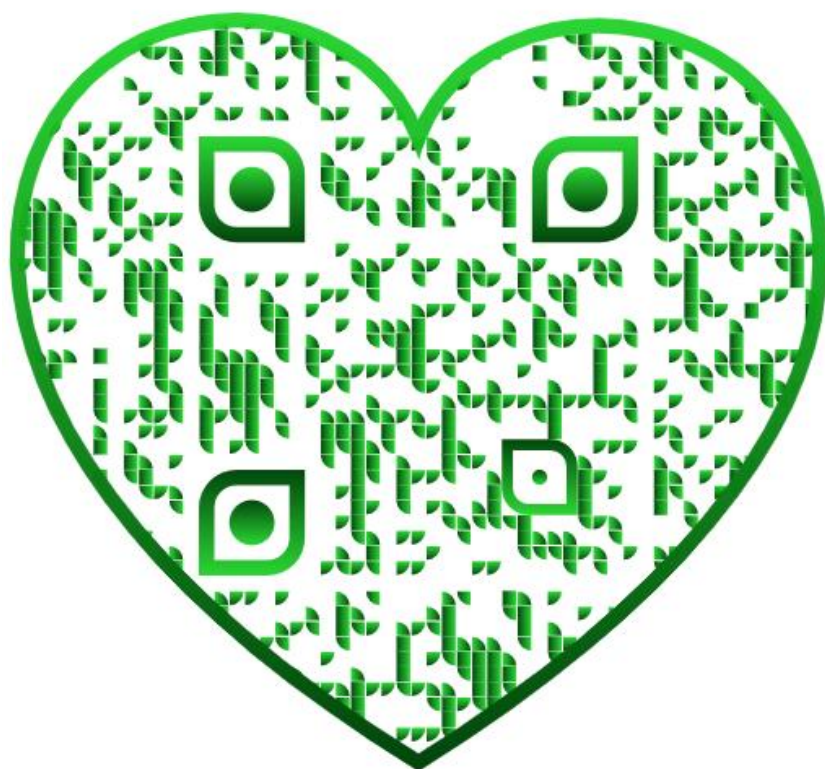


Reborn to Master the Blade:

From **Hero-King**
to Extraordinary
Squire ♀

7

Author: Hayaken
Illustrator: Nagu



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Chapter I: Inglis, Age 15—The Eastern Front (1)

While Inglis and friends were on the move in Alcard to the north, events were underway in Karelia's east, near the border with Venefic.

A Flygear squadron led by Rafael Bilford surveyed a nearly infinite swarm of birdlike magicite beasts. Beyond them lay a massive block of ice and inside it, a Prismer—the same Prismer that he and Ripple had transported to the border on their previous mission. It had previously been kept under close observation in Ahlemin, a town farther within Karelia, but an observed increase in the rate in which it brought forth magicite beasts had caused them to place it along the frontier in order to limit the damage those beasts could cause. And during the standoff with Venefic's forces along the border, it had summoned even more magicite beasts than it had previously.

The Paladins could safely ignore the rimebound Prismer if it was maintaining its coterie. However, if Karelian forces advanced en masse, Venefic no doubt would decide to intercept them. The current situation was a difficult one.

"Knights!" Rafael called out. "With Venefic's army advancing, we can't afford to take heavy losses here! Be cautious, and try to keep losses to a minimum!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Understood!"

"As you order!"

Morale was high as the knights answered Rafael's call, but doubt was eating away at him. To conserve strength against the magicite beasts in preparation for a clash with Venefic—this may have been the appropriate decision, but the first priority for that strength was supposed to be the protection of everyone from magicite beasts. He could not understand why the people of the surface would fight one another while still faced with the threat of magicite beasts. He was too mature, surely, to refuse the mission on those grounds, but still, he had his doubts.

"Listen up, everyone! I know Rafael just told you this too, but don't overwork yourselves and get hurt! Staying safe is what matters!" Ripple cheerfully pumped the knights up.

"Ah! Lady Ripple's smiling face is with us again!"

"I didn't realize how much I missed it!"

“We needed that!”

She was making her return to the Paladins after her stay at the knights’ academy. The Paladins relied on the hialal menace not only for her power but also as an inspiration on the battlefield.

“See, Eris?” Ripple needled her fellow hialal menace. “They were so sad without me! Haven’t you been giving them smiles as you mingled with them? That part’s important, you know!”

“Well, I have been spending time with them. I think I managed to cover for you,” Eris replied.

“Are you sure?” Ripple glanced askance at the knights.

“Well, we’ve seen a lot more of her around lately...” one knight said.

“But no smiles,” another added.

“She seems like she’s been even more on edge lately.”

“Doesn’t really seem like it,” Ripple summed up.

“Well, excuse me! I’m sorry I’m not as cheerful as you are!” Eris fired back.

“It’s okay. Some have people skills, and some don’t,” Rafael said, easing the tension. “Lady Eris has been doing her best at what she’s good at.”

“Ah. You sure are good at smoothing things over, Raf.” Ripple patted him on the back.

“Ha ha ha, thanks.”

“Anyway, enough of that,” Eris began. “I’m going to do what I do best. Orders to attack, please.” She unsheathed her twin blades and prepared herself for the clump of magicite beasts ahead.

Rafael’s expression hardened as he nodded. “All hands, prepare for combat! After a long-range volley, Lady Eris will lead a close-in assault to wipe out the enemy!”

“Yes, sir!” The knights readied their Artifacts as one. Their shapes varied, but each was equipped with a Gift capable of long-range attacks.

The Paladins were skilled in combat against magicite beasts. Each member of the order possessed multiple Artifacts, suited for both long-range and close combat, and they all used them well. In particular, many lower-class Artifacts had simple Gifts suited to long-range combat, such as launching flames or fireballs, or shooting ice arrows, so at least one such option was available to each member.

“Ready, aim...”

At Rafael’s order, the knights prepared in unison. Their Artifacts surged with flame and ice, lightning and wind. Rafael sensed them behind him as he kept his eye on the incoming enemy. The magicite beasts progressed forward in an undifferentiated clump. Before long, they came close enough for the knights to unleash their attacks.

“They’re in range! Fire!”

At Rafael’s forceful command, countless projectiles of flame and ice, lightning and wind flew by him. The volleys found their marks in less than a second. Magicite beast after magicite beast fell, struck directly.

Among the hail of fire, Ripple’s stood out, a curtain of bullets from her twin golden guns overwhelming her foes.

“Wow! You’ve still got it, Lady Ripple!” the knights cheered.

“Looks like you’re feeling fine, then.” Eris was relieved that Ripple hadn’t missed a beat.

“Of course I am! After all the help Inglis and the others gave me, I’ve gotta do my best as a hial menace!”

Eris chuckled. “I suppose I should learn from that. Rafael! The enemy has scattered! Let’s close in and finish them off individually.”

Eris was right; the magicite beasts, having been met with long-range fire, were far fewer than before. They had spread out in all directions, under pressure.

“All right—charge! Destroy the scattered magicite beasts one by one! To limit losses, be sure to always outnumber them!” Rafael ordered.

The knights’ war cries echoed, but Eris was already out ahead, her Flygear at full speed. “We’re going on ahead!”

“Ooh, Eris, you’re really getting into it!” Ripple remarked.

“Can’t let you steal the show, can I? Handle the controls, if you don’t mind.” Leaving the piloting to Ripple, Eris leaned over the Flygear’s bow. She struck a gallant figure, her resilience to the sheer wind resistance making it clear that her physical abilities were far beyond a normal person’s. “All right—here goes! First in the fight!”

“Yeah!” Ripple responded, as she brought the Flygear on a trajectory directly between two magicite beasts.

“Take this!” Eris yelled.

Slashhh!

As she passed by, her blades tore through the magicite beasts to either side, the sharp edges cleaving the beasts in two. Their bodies crashed down onto the rocky hills below. “I’m not done yet!”

“Yeah! Get as many as you want!” Ripple swiftly looped the Flygear around in pursuit of the other magicite beasts.

Eris stayed as steady as a statue through the rapid loops and rolls, cutting down magicite beast after magicite beast. Ripple took one hand off the controls to rain down fire with one of her own guns, racking up a kill count for herself. It seemed like the duo could hunt down the entire group themselves.

The knights talked among themselves as they followed. "Wow, put the two of them together and numbers don't even matter!"

"Let's back them up!"

"I'm not even sure they need us..."

While it wouldn't be good to simply become dependent on the hial menaces, the Paladins' way of fighting was to join in at their side, inspired to heroism by their presence. With Ripple back, not just the knights but Eris too had regained something that was missing. Each of them was dependable in their own way.

And this, in turn, was thanks to Inglis, Rafinha, and the others at the knights' academy saving Ripple. As he watched the battle, Rafael thought of them.

Chris, Rani... It's because of you that Ripple is back safe and sound. Thank you so much. Now it's our turn to defend our country! So don't worry about us! Study hard at the academy!

From what Ripple had said, the cafeteria at the academy had been destroyed, so they might be having trouble finding enough to eat, though. It would be a pity if they had to suffer through hunger, so Rafael wondered if after this mission he should stop by home in Ymir on the way back and bring them some food that would keep well. The situation had become stable enough that he had the leeway to consider such things, and the enemy's numbers were decreasing rapidly without their having inflicted significant damages on his own forces.

"Sir Rafael! We've forced the magicite beasts back!" his second-in-command soon reported.

"Excellent work, everyone! Treat the wounded at once! We'll leave behind a patrol, and return to the carrier!"

"Yes, sir!" the knights replied, and the Paladins began their return to Ambassador Theodore's ship in high spirits.

"Hey, Rafael! I'm gonna stick around for a little bit and check things out!" Ripple offered.

"Certainly, Lady Ripple. Please don't push yourself too hard, though."

"It'll be fine. I'm just gonna take a quick look."

"I'll come along as well, then," Eris said. "Rafael, you and the others can head back first."

"Very well. Then, the main force will return first!" Rafael said. The bulk of the soldiers soon left, leaving one patrol as well as Eris and Ripple.

"Lady Eris! Lady Ripple! We'll continue to guard the area!" a knight said.

"Sure, thanks!" Ripple answered with a kind smile and waved to the dispersing knights.

“So, what’s this about, Ripple?” Eris asked.

“Well...I want to take a closer look at that frozen Prismer. It seems different from when I brought it here.”

“Really? I was on other orders then...”

“When I brought it here, it started bringing forth a few magicite beasts along the way, but nowhere near this many. So...”

“It’s getting stronger, you mean?”

“It might be. I think if I get a closer look, I’ll be able to tell.”

“Got it. Let’s go.”

Eris and Ripple nodded to each other and set the Flygear’s course directly for the Prismer. It was a short flight, and while no new magicite beasts appeared, they both began to shudder.

“Ugh... Eris...” Ripple groaned.

“I could tell immediately without you even saying anything. This is...”

“Yeah... I wouldn’t be surprised if it woke up right now!”

Eris and Ripple were both seasoned hial menaces. They’d long since stopped counting, or even thinking about, the years that had passed. They’d fought more than their share of Prismers.

And that was why they knew that mighty power was a force strong enough to destroy an entire country.

Each time they faced it, they hoped it would be the last. Yet face it they did, again and again. And now, they could sense that power directly in front of them. It could awaken at any time.

Its quiet shell of ice was no longer anything but its own whim—and who knew when its mood would change? It could be years. It could be decades.

It also could be *any second now*. Eris and Ripple had no way of knowing its thoughts.

“The time has come to fight a Prismer...again...” Eris murmured.

The time when a Prismer awakened was also the time when a hial menace’s true power had to be harnessed—to become a weapon, to be wielded by a holy knight.

And that holy knight, as the last light of humanity, would burn away facing that Prismer.

Win or lose, the knight would fall.

Eris had seen it happen over and over. No matter how hard they tried to resist, that fate was unavoidable. And this time, it was Rafael’s turn. He’d face his destiny soon.

No matter how many times she experienced it, she couldn’t get used to—couldn’t *let* herself get used to—the pain in her heart. As Eris’s hand began to tremble, Ripple gently covered it with her own to calm her. Eris had a reputation for brusqueness and detachment, but that couldn’t be further from the truth; she was more sensitive than

most.

From a hieral menace's perspective, this fate was a necessity. To the holy knight or their family, it was no different from a visit from the reaper.

It was because this weighed on her that she kept her distance, unwilling to broach the subject. And it was because this weighed so heavily that, when the time came, she was the most psychologically impacted.



I need to support her, Ripple thought. “Well, if anyone can change things, it’s that girl Inglis! I just know this time she’ll find a way for it to turn out different! Not going to go into her personality here, but just in terms of power alone, she’s unbelievable!”

“Y-Yes...you’re right. She’s the only hope we have left...”

“Anyway, let’s head back. We need to tell them what we saw, so we can keep things at a stalemate and not provoke the Prismer any more than we have to. And in the meantime, maybe we can get Inglis here?”

“Won’t Rafael object? He doesn’t want to expose her to danger...”

“Sounds like the kind of thing he’d say, yeah. But she definitely wants to go to dangerous places, so I think it’s a chance to get to know her better and drop a few hints.”

“Well, that would be between her and us. And that’s assuming she *can* do something about the Prismer. For now, why don’t we bring the idea up—but with Ambassador Theodore, not with Rafael?” Eris suggested. “The part about the Prismer itself, we need to tell everyone, of course.”

“Yeah, you’re right. That just might work...so long as Venefic cooperates.”

While it was true there was no time to lose regarding the Prismer, the Paladins’ mission was to hold back Venefic’s forces that had advanced to the border. And the Paladins were the ones who had moved the Prismer there to begin with. Their intent had been to limit damage in Ahlemin, its original position, and present an obstacle to Venefic’s planned invasion, but no one knew whether that decision had helped or hindered matters. Only time would tell.

“I certainly hope they do,” Eris said. “If a Prismer’s making its move, it’s no time for people to be fighting amongst themselves.”

Hieral menaces existed to protect humans from magicite beasts. They had no desire to see the people of the surface fighting, and while it might be their duty to participate, it rang discordant with their nature. That said, they certainly couldn’t object to facing off against invaders.

“Anyway, let’s head back.”

“Yeah, off we go.” Ripple turned the rudder, and the Flygear reversed course and headed toward their carrier. After a short distance, though...

“Please... Please...” A voice sounded in Ripple’s head.

“What...? Hey, Eris? Did you say something?”

“Hm? No, I didn’t say anything.” Eris shook her head in confusion.

“Huh? I could’ve sworn I heard someone talking...”

Eris didn’t appear to have heard a thing, though.

“Please...draw back your forces, flee... If you don’t, something terrible will happen...”

“Ah...! There it is again! It’s telling me it wants us to fall back!” Ripple exclaimed.

“What?! Who? Is it the Prismer? I wonder if it wants us to use our forces rather than have just us two...”

“I don’t think so. If it was the Prismer, wouldn’t you be able to hear it?”

Eris was also a hialal menace. If this was a magicite beast that interacted with hialal menaces, there was no reason why Eris wouldn’t be able to hear the voice. Besides, in Ripple’s long experience as a hialal menace, she’d never heard the voice of a Prismer. Prismers were absolute embodiments of destruction with whom it was impossible to communicate.

“Then does that mean...are you not completely healed?! Are you okay? Does it hurt anywhere?” Eris peppered Ripple with questions in clear concern.

“Well, it’s true nothing changed about what they did to me, so I’m not exactly healed...”

Ripple had been accidentally summoning her kin, the demihumans, who had been made into magicite beasts. She had been taken advantage of with the aim of devastating Karelia through unrelenting magicite beast attacks. Her condition utilized the unique ability of demihumans to telepathically communicate with one another, and thus, the only magicite beasts she was summoning were those who had previously been demihumans.

With her kind nearing extinction, wiping out the demihumans turned magicite beasts would prevent Ripple bringing forth any more of them. Inglis had proposed the most forceful solution possible: summon all of them until there were no more. Thus, while Ripple remained unchanged, the trap which had been implanted in her became ineffective when there was simply nothing left for it to summon.

Ambassador Theodore, aligned with the Triumvirate faction in Highland politics, had said that this was punishment enacted by their rivals, the Papal League, for Karelia’s choice to align with the Triumvirate, who were willing to lend-lease Flygears and Flygear Ports to the surface.

Ripple had been created as a hialal menace by the Papal League, while Eris had been by the Triumvirate. Thus, while Ripple had fallen under its effects, Eris had not. It was likely that there was a similar trap waiting within her as well, but the Triumvirate had no need to punish Karelia.

Traditionally, Karelia had maintained a policy of favoring neither

the Triumvirate nor the Papal League. Having both Eris from the Triumvirate and Ripple from the Papal League was clear proof of that. This was thanks to King Carlias's dealings with Highland. However, Prince Wayne disagreed and actively sought to strengthen Karelia's military with Flygears and Flygear Ports from the Triumvirate. His goal seemed to be a move toward military parity between Highland and the surface. Ambassador Theodore, his personal friend, not only approved of but supported these moves. Their plan would produce wonderful results if allowed to come to fruition, but it was also risky.

The changes in Ripple...

The invasion from Venefic...

Both, surely, were related to the actions of the two leaders.

"I don't feel any different, and nothing's happening with me physically. The voice didn't seem hostile either..." Ripple then turned her attention to the unseen interlocutor. "Hey, who are you? How can you talk to me? What's going to happen if we don't fall back?"

"You are the only one who can hear my voice... If this continues, an unnecessary tragedy will play out...so, please..."

"An unnecessary tragedy? I don't understand what that means. I'm a pragmatist here. I know that Prismers' gonna be trouble, but if we fall back too far, we won't be able to stop Venefic. I need a more concrete reason—"

"Please... Please... Flee..." The voice faded away.

"Heeeeeeey? Heeey! What's wrong? I can't hear you! Are you okay?!"

Eris eyed Ripple with worry. "I didn't hear any of that."

"Umm...I don't really understand what happened. Let's just head back. There's the Prismers to deal with—we need to get Inglis here."

"Got it. But tell me if anything happens, okay?"

"I caused a lot of trouble for the Paladins, and for everyone at the knights' academy, but there is one bright side," Ripple said hesitantly.

"Hmm?"

Ripple chuckled. "You're even kinder than usual." She shot an impish grin at Eris.

"Ah?! Sheesh, this isn't the time. I'm just worried that if you're not feeling well, we'll be shorthanded—"

"Sure, sure, thanks. Now let's go!"

"Yes..."

The Flygear bearing the two returned to the mother ship at top speed.



Several days later aboard Ambassador Theodore's ship, which served as the Paladins' command post in their efforts against Venefic,

a meeting was held in a space near the bridge. It doubled as an operations room and a conference room.

“Venefic has responded: ‘We cannot accept your proposal. You are the ones who brought the Prismer here to begin with. This is your responsibility,’” the knight who had acted as a messenger reported.

“I see. Thank you.” Prince Wayne’s face was expressionless. “I suppose that’s the response I expected,” he noted calmly.

“From their standpoint, it must seem as though we’re using the Prismer as a shield,” Ambassador Theodore said, disappointed.

Prince Wayne, who had received a report from Ripple and Eris that the Prismer could wake at any moment, had proposed a truce to Venefic, even asking for Venefic’s support if the creature awakened. Karelia would have to manage on its own.

“I can’t deny that was our intent,” Theodore continued. “Limiting Venefic’s options was part of the plan. However, I didn’t expect it to backfire so completely.”

“But even if they say it’s our responsibility...magicite beasts and Prismers don’t particularly care about geopolitics. If that Prismer awakens, it could head for Karelia or for Venefic. We have no way of knowing,” Eris noted.

At its current stage, the Prismer could no longer be moved. Provoking it in any way was best avoided. If it awakened and moved toward Venefic, how would the leaders of that country react?

Would they, only then, call upon Karelia for help? In such a case, aid would be less than forthcoming. Thus, Eris believed that the safest course would have been to take a wait-and-see posture, not immediately rejecting the idea of cooperation, but Eris wasn’t a part of Venefic.

“It’s dangerous. They’re underestimating the Prismer. If anything happens, it’ll be too late,” she said.

“They might have a reason not to back down. They’re backed by the Papal League, and that may come with hard conditions,” Ambassador Theodore suggested, his eyes downcast. “Venefic has long hungered for Karelian land. And now, with some sort of pressure from Highland, it’s come to this...”

Venefic’s lands were primarily barren wilderness, and its peoples’ lives suffered for it. Taking some of Karelia’s fertile fields had been their wish for generations, long before King Carlias or Prince Wayne were in the picture.

“Hey, what if...?” Ripple began.

“What’s wrong? Lady Ripple?” Rafael asked.

“Ah, no, sorry. It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.” Ripple giggled, trying to pass it off. She had been about to ask what the plan was if the Prismer did awaken and headed for Venefic. Borders meant

nothing to magicite beasts, nor to people suffering. Ideally, even if it moved toward Venefic, they'd make the both humane and gallant choice to provide the utmost aid, but ideals didn't always come to fruition.

Fighting a Prismer with all their might meant using a hialal menace as a weapon—meant taking Rafael's life. Knowing this, she didn't even want to discuss fighting the Prismer, much less in front of him.

If it came to that, the choice would be Prince Wayne and Rafael's. She wouldn't be able to criticize them if they ignored the Prismer should it go toward Venefic, the reasoning being that it was no longer their problem. However, she'd certainly prefer a mission of mutual aid, so long as there was a nonnegotiable condition that neither she nor Eris be used as a weapon.

But more important than any of that to Ripple and Eris was the status of Inglis.

Inglis would fight the Prismer no matter where it was going, and she'd love every second of it.

If she took it down, the problem would be solved. All's well that ends well, right? The *raison d'être* of hialal menaces would be gone, but that would be fine. No need for hialal menaces meant no threat from Prismers. If it prevented any more sorrow, Ripple didn't care if she wasn't needed anymore. They could even discard her, and she wouldn't mind it. If anything, that was her hope.

She'd already talked with Ambassador Theodore about calling for Inglis. He had probably gone on to talk with Prince Wayne. For now, what was needed was to delay things as long as possible. Rather than defeat a powerful foe with an inevitable sacrifice and the grief that brought, it would be better to smash it with a smile and a giggle. Everyone would be happier that way.

At least, she herself would be happier that way, Ripple felt firmly.

"Anyway, as for our own move—" Prince Wayne continued, just to be interrupted.

"Pardon me! I bear an urgent report from our patrols!" A knight from the patrol rushed into the operations room, half-panicked.

"Thank you. Has there been a change in the Prismer's status?" Rafael inquired.

"Yes!" his subordinate answered. "The frozen Prismer has brought forth a large number of birdlike magicite beasts! More than we've ever seen! It looked like at least a thousand!"

Prince Wayne grunted in surprise.

"So many... It must be close to awakening..." Theodore grimaced.

"Ah...! Notify all our forces at once! Prepare to intercept them!" Rafael ordered.

“No, they’re—” The knight seemed to have something more to say.

“Huh? What is it?”

“I don’t know if we need to—the magicite beast force is moving as one, eastward! They’re advancing toward Venefic!”

“Ah...! Have they chosen a new course, knowing we’ll intercept them if they come this way?”

“We don’t know what they’re thinking,” Ripple said. “It may just be a coincidence.”

“Yes, that’s right. But in any case...” Eris began. *It’s not yet a full-scale emergency for Karelia*, she thought, *but it’s still become complicated*.

Venefic had just refused a proposal of cooperation against the Prismer and the magicite beasts. Since that was the case, simply ignoring the beasts was a practical option. Karelia had brought the Prismer here, but it was Venefic that had mobilized their army with the aim of invading Karelia. If the mutual destruction of the magicite beasts and the invaders let them maintain full preparedness for the Prismer’s awakening, well...

It would of course mean some guilt, some complicated feelings, but it was a practical option.

Before Eris or Ripple could fully consider the situation and come to a conclusion as to what should be done, Rafael spoke. “Orders remain the same. Prepare to intercept!” His voice was firm and clear.

“Rafael...” Eris murmured. He must have still felt guilty for having brought the Prismer here. Taking responsibility was like him.

Ripple waited through the silence and then said, “Well, we did move it here, so I don’t mind.”

“Ah, no, it isn’t that. Just... No matter when, no matter who, if people are threatened by magicite beasts, I want to protect them. That’s why I became a knight. I can’t just sit back and watch,” Rafael explained.

His pure, uncalculating reasoning left Eris and Ripple speechless. Rafael was no stranger to them, but considering the situation, even this was beyond their expectations.

A knight’s duty was to protect people from magicite beasts—Rafael truly embodied that ideal. They’d served together in the Paladins for many years and seen many things, but he hadn’t changed at all. Sometimes, it felt like that purity and clarity cleansed their hearts. That was Rafael’s charm. Eris and Ripple both knew his little sister, Rafinha, and she was the same way. They both had similar moral codes.

“Prince Wayne, Ambassador Theodore, give me clearance to sortie!” Rafael said.

“Me too. I promise I won’t do anything reckless,” Ripple added.

“I’ll go along with them as well,” Eris volunteered.

Prince Wayne watched the trio before responding. “Ah, right... There’s no stopping you at a time like this. I believe your openness will help create trust, even with our foes. Thank you.”

“But as Lady Ripple said, please don’t do anything reckless. Never forget the weight that you bear,” Ambassador Theodore added.

“Yes, sir! Then, I’m off! Lady Eris, Lady Ripple, let’s go!” Rafael said.

“Right!” Eris responded.

“Yeah! Got it!” Ripple agreed.

The trio rushed to the Flygear hangar.



Led by Rafael, the Paladins made haste as they headed for the eastern border. Before long, their target was in sight. The sky was dark with the shadows of countless birdlike magicite beasts.

Eris gasped from inside the Flygear. “There are so many of them!”

“Yeah... This is getting *real* serious!” Ripple said.

The Prismer’s activity continued to grow. That its awakening would soon occur was the inescapable conclusion. But even as they hoped Inglis would arrive on the front quickly, they had to deal with the massive flock which lay before them. Eris and Ripple were in full agreement.

“Hey, Rafael! How are we supposed to deal with this?” Ripple asked.

“There are too many to take a direct approach—even if we intercept their path, there are just too many!” Eris noted.

“We’re going with the option that risks the fewest losses!” Rafael replied.

“Oh?” Ripple said, eager to hear the plan.

Eris was similarly pleased. “Well, that’s certainly good to hear!”

“Yes! Eris, Ripple, and I will charge in! Everyone else will provide suppressive fire from a distance and finish off the scattered enemies at range!”

“Whaaat?!” Ripple practically yelled. “Just the three of us charging in?”

“That isn’t how you normally fight,” Eris noted.

“Correct,” Rafael replied. “However, this puts the fewest people in harm’s way!”

Rafael did not prefer tactics in which he stood forth and resolved the situation through his personal prowess. He did not want his subordinates in the Paladins to become dependent on him. In the event of a Prismer’s awakening or appearance, Rafael would have to give his life in the fight against it. If that came to pass, he did not

want the knights who had come to depend on him to be left rudderless in his absence. Therefore, he was always taking care to improve the skills of the other knights so that they could become a group that could defend people on their own.

This had become even more important ever since Leon, who'd shared his position, had left the Paladins. With that, he could no longer think that even if he was gone, another holy knight would be there. Rafael regretted—but did not resent—Leon's departure. He understood how Leon had come to that decision. Besides, the politically complicated incident which prompted his departure had occurred in Rafael's hometown. In a way, Leon's choice had protected Rafael's family.

But laying all that aside, Rafael believed using himself, Eris, and Ripple as a primary offensive force was the most appropriate tactic for the current situation.

"Lieutenant-Colonel, we'll proceed as I described!" Rafael instructed. "We three will charge in, and you're to attack the scattered enemies from a distance! I leave the command of this side to you!"

"Yes, Sir Rafael!" his second-in-command replied. He immediately brought the knights into formation. "Knights, position yourselves for long-range fire! Do not take isolated positions. Maintain a close formation to cover your fellows! Hold formation as we follow Sir Rafael!"

"Yes, sir!" the knights answered.

"Let's go, Lady Eris, Lady Ripple!" Rafael leaped from his second-in-command's Flygear to the one that Eris and Ripple were using, landing on its bow.

"Yes! Understood!" Changing places with him, Eris unsheathed her twin blades, preparing for the attack.

Ripple tightly gripped the controls. "All right! Full speed ahead! Don't fall off, now!"

"Okay, I'm ready! I'll be fine even if I do fall off, though!" Rafael said.

Ripple chuckled. "Yeah, you probably would be. All right, here goes!" She brought the Flygear to full speed. The single aircraft rushed ahead.

It was a high-performance Flygear with enhanced thrusters. In no time at all, it had broken out from the formation and closed in on the flock of flying magicite beasts.

As it did, Rafael unsheathed his own Artifact longsword. Its softly glowing blade was translucent like a crimson gem, and the hilt was sculpted in mimicry of the legendary dragons. This was not due to Rafael's tastes, but simply how it had been when he received it.

Its name was Dragon Fang; allegedly, it had been carved from an

actual fang taken from a gigantic dragon. Apparently, while dragons were legendary to the people of the surface, Highland considered their existence rather more concrete. While, categorically, it was merely an upper-class Artifact, its might was unmatched by any of its peers. Its strength was outclassed only by a transformed hialar menace.

When Ambassador Theodore had laid eyes on it, he had warned that, while it was extremely powerful, the burden it placed on its wielder's body was immense. He cautioned Rafael to use it sparingly. In Rafael's experience, that certainly held true. When the Paladins had first acquired the sword, he and Leon discussed who should wield it. Leon had passed on the opportunity, calling it an exhausting ordeal. Since then, Rafael had been its wielder.

"Haaaah!" Rafael held Dragon Fang before him and focused; he felt a pulsating power flow from its blade. If the Artifact was carved from a dragon's fang, it must have retained some of the spirit, the might, of that dragon. Rafael did feel a sort of will from it.

At the beginning, even wielding it for a short time had left him exhausted, but as he used the sword more and more, its burden had lightened. Not just as if he was getting used to it, but as if the sword's own will accepted him and lent him its power. At the same time, he did grow accustomed to the sword, drawing closer to it—the mighty dragon whose fang it was. What lay at the end of that journey?

"We've caught up with them! Chaaaaarge!" Ripple took one hand off the controls to fire her gun. From its barrel shot out not a bullet of light like usual, but a twisting, swirling dark gleam. "Take a bit of this to start with!"

Her dark spiral quickly struck the magicite beast in the lead, encompassing its body in darkness.

Zrrrrp!

The darkness spread to its neighbors. Her shot had created a powerful gravitational "eye," of sorts. Unable to resist, the magicite beasts affected were pulled into one solid clump.

"Eris! Now!"

"Yes! Slash them, cut them, and mince them!" Eris's blades swung forth from the Flygear's bow faster than the eye could see, slicing out in all directions, flying through the intervening space, and raining down on the mass of magicite beasts brought together by Ripple. Their sharp edges, as Eris commanded, sliced the sphere of beasts to pieces. In only a few seconds, it was reduced to a hail of shredded pieces. "Next! Keep them coming!" she called out.

"Okay!" Ripple answered. "Coming right up!"

Even Rafael considered the two in battle a sight to behold. In the

blink of an eye, Eris and Ripple had killed dozens of magicite beasts.

But that was nothing compared to the number of foes which remained. He wished they could maintain this momentum, but the strain on both of them would soon be too much. If they got tired, they'd begin to lose steam. Before that happened, he needed to join in, breaking up the enemy and forcing them to scatter. From there, the Paladins could handle the beasts individually. Even if some reached Venefic's forces, it would be easier for them to deal with the reduced numbers.

"I'm joining in! Grahhhhh!"

"Groooooowr!"

As Rafael gave a shout, the roar of some gigantic creature joined in unison. It had to belong to a dragon—specifically, it was the roar of Dragon Fang.

Suddenly, his body was wrapped in armor of the same crimson color as Dragon Fang's blade. Hard red wings extended from its back. This hadn't always happened when he'd wielded the Artifact; the transformation had developed as he grew accustomed to Dragon Fang and deepened his bonds with it. It was proof that the sword's draconic might was being granted to him.

"Go for it, Rafael!" Eris called out.

"If you get tired, fall back! We'll cover you!" Ripple said.

"Yes! Yaaaaaah!" Rafael leaped from the deck of the Flygear. His wings were no mere decorations; they allowed him to fly as skillfully as a dragon.



Holding the sword before him, he cut upward through the flock of magicite beasts.

Slash! Bssh-bssh-bssh-bssssshhhh!

The blade cut through the magicite beasts in his path as if they were nothing, its blistering heat vaporizing them. Breaking through to the top of the flock and looking back down, he could see Eris and Ripple watching him through the clear passage he'd carved out.

That passage remained for but a moment. Countless magicite beasts filled the gap, blocking them from his sight.

"I'm not done yet!" Rafael reversed his trajectory, this time cutting through the enemy formation on a diagonal dive. Again, the beasts were burned away without offering any resistance. "Need to be thorough!" Reversing course once more, he cut horizontally through the flock of beasts.

This was a tactic that could not be used in a general, chaotic melee, where friend and foe alike were scattered throughout the battlefield; he wouldn't want to injure his allies. It was only usable when he charged in as part of a small group taking on a much larger one. It was not Rafael's preferred way of fighting, but having committed to it, he was giving it his all.

"Grahhhhh!" Rafael—seen only as a crimson spark—swept through the enemy over and over. Too many of the beasts remained, but they were making progress. "All right! They're beginning to scatter!"

The flock's movement had changed. Rather than continuing east toward Venefic as one mass, they were thrown into disarray under the pressure. It was similar to how forces of humans would disperse in a panic when their morale broke and they fled. Rafael didn't know if magicite beasts were capable of complex thought, but it could be a matter of them following their instincts and fleeing.

"Now that they've scattered, we can take them out one by one!"

This was probably a good time for him to return. He'd already used a lot of energy, and his fatigue was beginning to wear on him. He couldn't just collapse on the battlefield. He needed to rendezvous with Eris and Ripple, return to the knights, and take command.

Once he got back to the Flygear, he sheathed Dragon Fang. As he did, his red armor and wings disappeared. "Eris, Ripple, the enemy's lines have broken! This should be enough. Let's join up with the rest of our forces!"

"Of course, Rafael!" Eris agreed.

"Hey, you two! Look at that!" Ripple pointed eastward, toward a

squadron of Flygears surrounding a Flygear Port.

Rafael gasped. "That's—"

"It's not the Paladins?! It must be Venefic's army—"

The uniforms worn by its crew bore not Karelia's insignia—not that of the Paladins—but Venefic's. They must have come to respond to the approaching magicite beasts.

"Good to see them here!" Ripple said. "There's still lots of magicite beasts!"

Despite the trio's work, their enemies were still numerous. If all of the magicite beasts scattered, they might actually cause widespread damage. There were no human settlements nearby, but if the beasts kept flying, they'd eventually reach one. The Paladins had to shoot down as many as possible—and some assistance from Venefic would help.

"Yes, it's excellent timing!" Rafael agreed. "Lady Eris! Lady Ripple! Let's go speak with their commander! We can mop up the remaining magicite beasts together!"

"That's a good idea!" Eris agreed. "Let's go!"

"Okay!" Ripple said. "I'm bringing us over there!"

Ripple turned the Flygear eastward, toward Venefic's forces, but as she did, those forces unleashed a hail of long-range fire from their Artifacts, shooting bolts of flame and ice.

Their target was not the magicite beasts, but instead the Paladins arrayed at a distance from Rafael to handle the beasts. The Paladins, focused on the beasts, were caught by surprise. Several Flygears were hit, and their wreckage fell toward the ground.

"Wh—?!" Rafael, Eris, and Ripple could not believe their eyes for a moment.

Venefic's forces must have seen the Paladins stopping the approaching magicite beasts, so why would they not join forces with Karelia? They were not only ignoring the beasts, but they were attacking Karelia.

Yet the unthinkable was unfolding before them.

The Paladins, in formation to repel the beasts, had been thrown into disarray, and the beasts used that chance to close in. With their formation disrupted, they were on the back foot, and Flygears were falling to the beasts. And with further disregard for the situation, the Venefic forces, having taken the initiative, moved in for close combat with the Paladins.

"They're ignoring the magicite beasts to force a close-in fight with our forces?!" Eris gasped.

"Sheesh, what are they thinking?! There are magicite beasts here! This isn't the time for that!" Ripple was just as angry as she was shocked.

But even more furious was Rafael, who shook with rage. “I won’t forgive them stabbing people in the back while they protect them from the magicite beasts!” He unsheathed Dragon Fang again—and unleashed its power.

“Groooooowr!”

A roar rang out, and the crimson armor reappeared on Rafael. “Stoop!” he bellowed, charging ahead.

“Ah! Rafael!” Ripple called out.

“Wait! You can’t just go in alone!” Eris yelled.

As their voices chased him, Rafael sliced through the sky toward the Venefic forces. He reached them in the blink of an eye, just as Venefic’s forces were just about to close with the Paladins.

A call arose from the Venefic side. “All right, go! Take everything down, whether magicite beast or foe! They’re both our country’s enemy!”

Venefic’s soldiers let loose a war cry in response.

However, as they did, the magicite beasts before them suddenly exploded.

Booooooooooom!

The roar of the explosion drowned out the soldiers’ shouts.

“Huh?! What was that?!”

“What’s going on?! Who’s attacking us?!”

“Th-That explosion was huge!”

Rafael’s voice sounded clearly from amidst the flames. “I’ll warn you once. If you continue to attack our forces, you’re next!” The force of his angry pronouncement sent shudders through Venefic’s troops.

“Wh—?! ”

“Is that?!”

“That’s the holy knight from Karelia!”

“What knight would attack those they find fighting magicite beasts?!” Rafael shouted. “Join us in finishing them off! The beasts are our enemy!”

However, he was met with a counterargument from a person aboard the Flygear Port floating in the center of Venefic’s formation. “A noble sentiment—but I must disagree! Knights have more enemies than mere magicite beasts! Is not repelling invaders also our duty? Surely you must agree, Sir Rafael Bilford, Karelia’s champion?”

Rafael recognized him, but he was shocked to see him here.

“You’re the Red Lion, Rochefort!”

Just as Rafael was Karelia’s strongest knight, General Rochefort

was Venefic's. He was a striking young man with flame-red hair, which left a strong impression. He was slightly older than Rafael, but they were close enough in age that during his academy years they had met in a tournament, their match ending in a tie.

They also both possessed a special-class Rune. Although they had not met since the tournament, Rafael had felt a certain sense of camaraderie with the man that transcended borders. Karelia and Venefic had long been hostile, but perhaps, he had hoped, the two could come to an understanding. Those faint hopes were shattered now.

"Invaders?" Rafael replied. "Is that us, or you?" Venefic was the first to have pushed into the border regions. That was indisputable.

"You tell me!" Rochefort shot back. "You have already entered Venefic territory. A foreign army entering without permission makes them invaders, no different from magicite beasts themselves! What wrong is there in repelling them?"

"That's absurd! Magicite beasts don't care about borders or loyalties! Humanity must join in cooperation against them! That's all we did! If we ignore the magicite beasts, they will eventually wipe us from the surface!"

"And why, in the first place, are there magicite beasts in this area? It's because you brought the corpse of that Prismer here! Your plan is to cause confusion by using the magicite beasts, then creep in little by little under the guise of cooperation! Isn't that right?!"

"I have absolutely no such intention! General Rochefort, a man such as you must understand what we were doing! Are those the tactics a force seeking to invade with the magicite beasts as cover would use? If you truly think so, you've lost your read on situations since I last met you in battle! Have capital politics swallowed you? Have you lost your shine as a warrior?!"

Rochefort's only response to Rafael was a loud laugh.

"What's so funny?!"

"You're still so naive! I'm glad to see you haven't changed! Yes, that's right. I saw you fighting your hardest to stop the magicite beasts, putting your life on the line even though they were bound for your enemy, serving as an example for your ideal of humanity joining together to fight the magicite beasts."

"If you understand that, then why—?!"

"*But!* In the end, you're just invaders of our lands who took magicite beasts as your vanguard! Do you understand? In this cesspool of a world, your ideals aren't worth anything! Everything is decided by those with power subduing those without! Things like justice and truth are only stories we tell ourselves after!"

"Ugh... Can't we talk this over?!"

“Absolutely not! Speak with your might, not your words, Rafael Bilford! Your head would make for a fine trophy!”

“Grr... If you won’t change your mind...” *Then I have no choice but to take Rochefort down here!* Rafael thought.

With their general lost, his troops would lose their will to fight the Paladins, even joining the battle against the magicite beasts—or at least ceasing their attack. Rochefort was prioritizing attacking the Paladins over attacking the beasts, but the rest of Venefic’s troops and their leaders might not feel the same. Many of them must have thought that, with the threat of magicite beasts, it was no time to be fighting Karelia. Rafael decided all he could do was remove Rochefort from the picture, and rely on his soldiers...

“Ah, so you will take me on! Wonderful! But I’m a busy man, Rafael Bilford! Let’s finish this quickly!”

“Don’t underestimate me. I may be outnumbered, but—”

“Ha ha ha ha! That’s not it! I say so because I recognize your prowess! Your Artifact is mighty as well. As expected of a major power like Karelia, a good knight with a good Artifact!”

“So, then, what’s your plan?”

“I’ll show you! Come, Arles!” Rochefort called on the lady knight by his side.

“Yes,” she replied. No, she was something more than a lady knight. She was a demihuman like Ripple was, with the ears and tail of an animal. She looked like she was in her late teens—also like Ripple. But where Ripple had a visibly energetic, bubbly personality, she was calm and ladylike, with a melancholic fragility. They may have shared a lineage, but the impressions they gave were complete opposites.

Rafael gasped. “A hialal menace?!”

According to Ripple, the demihumans had been nearly wiped out. Unlike the humans of the surface, they were susceptible to the effects of the Prism Flow, and thus had almost all been converted to magicite beasts. If she had survived, it would have been as a hialal menace, just like Ripple. Hialal menaces were not vulnerable to the Prism Flow.

“Why waste time fighting bare-handed?! I’ll overwhelm you with a weapon!”

Rochefort, his eyes fixed on Rafael, extended a hand to Arles.

“Yes... As you wish...” Arles wrapped her hands around his and held it close to her chest, treasuring the gesture.

Her body began to glow brightly. It was a divine, awe-inspiring sight, one Rafael had never seen before—but one he’d heard about.

“N-No way...” *This is the light released when a hialal menace’s true power is unleashed! Meaning—!*

“Haaaaa ha ha ha ha! That’s it! Good girl! Give me power!”

“I can’t believe it! You’d use a hial menace as a weapon against other humans?!”

“That’s riiiiight! C’mom, c’mom, c’mom, c’mom! I’m taking you down, holy knight!”

“Damn you!” Rafael’s anger reached a peak. This was unthinkable. Absurd. Unreasonable. The cost of taking a hial menace as a weapon, harnessing that overwhelming power, was the life of the holy knight who wielded her burning away.

Every holy knight knew that. Before they were appointed to the role, it was confirmed with them many times over. The holy knight was humanity’s last hope, last line of defense, against the ineffable disaster of a Prism.

When he was a child and the castle in his hometown Ymir had been attacked by magicite beasts, his mother Irina had told him that he must survive even if he had to abandon everyone else. At the time, the words had turned his stomach, and he still didn’t think he had done anything wrong by trying to protect his family then, but he had come to understand what she had meant.

That was the weight that a holy knight carried. They were an indispensable hope for the people of the surface. His mother may not have understood the truth of holy knights and hial menaces, but in a situation like this, the burden weighed even more heavily. It was simply outrageous to use a hial menace in a battle between humans. If Rochefort burned away here, what would become of his true duty? Who would protect the people from Prisms? He was taking humanity’s hope and throwing it underfoot to be trampled. Rafael didn’t know if Venefic had “holy knight” as a title or rank, but surely Rochefort knew the cost. And yet, even still—!

“Lady Arles, was it?! Please, stop this! This brings no hope, no salvation! Don’t you think a hial menace’s true power should only be used to protect people from Prisms?!” Rochefort was unlikely to be convinced, so Rafael attempted to persuade her.

However, silent in the light, Arles’s form changed from that of a demihuman woman to that of a huge shield with a golden glow.

“A shield?! That’s even more proof that your duty is to protect!” Rafael continued. A battle between humans was ill-fitting service for such a weapon.

“And protect I will!” Rochefort called out. “There’s something I have to protect! And I’ll do it by wiping you accursed invaders out!”

“You’re so selfish!”

“Ha ha ha ha ha! This is wonderful, wonderful power, Arles! Together as one, we bring forth such strength! Now, let it intoxicate us!”

Skreeeee!

An unmistakable high-pitched squeal filled Rafael's ears at the same time as a jewellike object inlaid on the shield began shining brightly. The glow focused into a bolt of light and shot toward Rafael.

"Huh?!" It was fast, but the wings granted to him by Dragon Fang made him just barely able to climb and evade it. The errant light crashed into the rocky hills below.

Boom!

Both the roar and the column of smoke hammered home the might behind that strike.

Rafael gasped. *A single, slender beam of light that powerful—*

"I'm not through with you yet!" Rochefort announced. "You're not getting away!"

Skreech-skreech-skreech!

Beam after beam chased Rafael. "Gah!" Rather than evading again, he swept at them with Dragon Fang, trying to clear them away, but their tremendous power shoved back his blade, flinging him backward.

"Aaagh!" he grunted.

He was somehow able to avoid crashing to the ground, but as he spun in the air, his vision blurred. When he could focus again, Rochefort's Flygear Port was far, far ahead of him. That was how far away he had been blown.

"So fearsome—so powerful!" He was facing something special. This was the ultimate Artifact, the only weapon powerful enough to take on a Prism. It was said that Dragon Fang, though only an upper-class Artifact, was the closest thing to the might of a hial menace. Even so, Rafael couldn't help but feel that there was an impassable wall separating the two.

"Being knocked back this far may actually help me out here..." Rafael had to admit that a straight-up fight between the two of them wouldn't end well for him. Plus, Rochefort could endure using a hial menace's true power for only so long. Naturally, Rafael had only one course to take.

"He's throwing his life away here!" he cursed to himself.

Rochefort's decision to wield a hial menace against other humans was unforgivable. If he burned himself away doing so, he wouldn't be able to fulfill the duty of those with special-class Runes—to defend people from a Prism. That would be a betrayal of those

who put their hopes in him. It was a complete waste.

However, if Rochefort killed him, then he would fail in his duty too. Both of them dying here would be the worst scenario. Rafael wasn't sure how long Rochefort could continue to wield the hial menace, but he was sure it wasn't forever. Thus, drawing out the encounter rather than meeting him head-on meant Rochefort would destroy himself.

"Where are you going, holy knight?!" Rochefort's voice rang out from above Rafael's head.

"Ah!" Rafael inhaled sharply. He hadn't realized Rochefort was rushing from the skies toward him, a round shield huge enough to nearly completely cover him held before him. Now it was too late.

"Take this!"

Slam!

"Gahhhh!" The shock of the blow smashed Rafael down into the rocky hills below. His back slammed into the ground, and the impact shot up dust as it left a crater. The force was so tremendous that it dazed him for a moment. Without the armor granted by Dragon Fang, it would have been even worse; it might even have killed him in a single blow.

"Ha ha ha ha ha!" Rochefort laughed. "This is great, Arles! Beating Karelia's strongest knight is like taking candy from a baby! Ah, I see it! I see it! A shining future!"

"You're not going to have a future!" Rafael argued. "You won't survive this!"

"Maybe, maybe not! But you're not going to live to find out!"

Craaack!

Light condensed on the surface of the shield, making a violent roar. In the aftermath of this convergence alone, some of the craggy hilltops nearby began to crumble. It was obvious at a glance how fearsome the power was.

"Farewell!" Rochefort yelled. The crackling shield swooped down toward Rafael from above.

"Gah!" *I still can't move from the previous blow, but I have to stand up! If I take this dead-on, it'll kill me!*

"Rafael!" He heard his name being yelled moments before a collision.

Slammmmm!

The noise was loud enough to hurt his ears. Where Rochefort's blow struck, a huge pillar of light arose, blowing away the surrounding earth and leaving a huge hole.

"This power is tremendous! Why aren't you using this to fight Prismers?!" Rafael shouted as he took in the scale of the destruction behind him.

Eris was beside him upon the Flygear. She had swooped in at top speed to rescue him at the last second before Rochefort's blow. "Yes! But we can't just go an eye for an eye!"

He nodded. "Yes, Lady Eris! Our duty is to protect people from Prismers!"

"That you recognize that importance is why we trust you! Let's gain some distance!"

"Yes! Thanks for saving me! Where's Ripple?!" he asked, confused why Eris was alone on the Flygear.

"She's gone to help the main force withdraw! The odds are against us with an unreasonable foe like this!"

"I see, that's good! Let's open up some distance and draw him back so he doesn't go after our main force!"

"Yes, that's right!"

As they spoke, a booming voice interrupted. "Did you really think I'd let you do as you please?! I'll smash you *and* your forces!" Rochefort was quickly closing in on the Flygear. The light streaming backward from the rim of the shield he held before him provided a powerful enough thrust to propel him forward. He was effectively flying through the sky.

"He's fast...!" Rafael gasped.

"He's already catching up?!" Eris said.

"Ha ha ha ha! So strong! So fast... So incredible! This is the best!" Rochefort's laughter was getting closer.

"What are you so happy about?!" Rafael yelled.

"This isn't some game! Why is their hial menace giving him that power?!" Eris asked.

Hial menaces could only transform when their hearts aligned with their wielder's. If her current wielder had flown into an indiscriminate rage, did that mean she felt the same? Why? Eris couldn't understand.

"Haaah!" The gleaming shield struck forth again.

"Rafael! Take the controls! Yaaah!" Eris handed the helm to Rafael and turned around. A slash from her twin blades leaped through the air, flashing a cross over Rochefort's shield, but the shining light covering him repelled the blades.

"Why isn't it working?!"

"I don't mind being scolded by a beautiful woman like you—but

put some more force into it!”

“Then how about this?!”

Sching!

Eris slid one blade down another, activated her power to make her strikes leap across space, and a hail of sparks exploded in front of Rochefort’s eyes.

“Gah! Blinding me?! That’s a cheap trick for a hial menace!”

“I don’t want to hear that from someone misusing a special-class Rune!”

As Eris fired back at Rochefort, Rafael maneuvered the Flygear to a sudden stop. Still dazed for a moment, Rochefort flew straight past them—

“All right!” Rafael took the chance to bring the Flygear to nearly ground level, hiding in the shadow of a peak and escaping Rochefort’s vision.

“Good job! Now let’s use the cover of the hilltops to get out of here!”

“Yes, Lady Eris! I hope there’s more we can use for cover!”

If they had been fighting in a forest, they could have easily slipped into hiding among the trees, but there was unfortunately little cover here—a few hilltops to shelter behind, but the surface itself was unobstructed with an open view.

“We’re gonna have to make it work! At least buy some time!”

“I will...!”

While hiding from Rochefort, the Flygear moved west at a low altitude. In the distance, they saw the site where the Prismer rested.

“Ah...! That’s—”

“So many! Not again!”

Another gigantic flock of birdlike magicite beasts was forming around the Prismer. There were so many that they nearly blackened the sky. There were even more than when Rafael had fought them earlier—and they were about to start moving as one.

“Oh no! They’re going to head west!”

West, toward Karelia.

“Ugh, not now of all times! Not when the people of the surface are fighting amongst themselves!”

“Lady Eris! If it’s come to this, let’s get him to work with us!”

“But how? He doesn’t seem willing to listen to reason!”

“Like this!” Rafael pitched the Flygear upward, and it flew out from the concealing crags into the sky.

“Wait! He’s going to see us!” Before Eris could say more, a voice bellowed.

“There you are! I thought a holy knight wasn’t supposed to turn his back on the enemy!” Rochefort immediately spotted the Flygear and came for it.

“Yeah, and we want him to see us!” Rafael said. “That’s how I’m going to get him to help! I’m bringing us straight into the magicite beasts!”

By fleeing to the midst of the cloud of beasts, not only would they have cover, but the excess power the shield scattered would spread through the swarm, destroying them.

“I see...! That’s a risky bet, but...” Eris began.

“It’s the only way we have to deal with both problems at once!”

“I agree! Let’s do it!”

Sching!

Again, Eris tried to blind Rochefort with her blades.

“That trick again?! It won’t work twice in a row!”

“He’s catching up!” Eris gasped.

“Lady Eris! Take the controls!”

Rafael and Eris switched positions. He leaped from the Flygear and moved to its rear with a roar as he pushed it forward, adding the full might of Dragon Fang’s wings to the Flygear’s thrust.

Even though the Flygear suddenly accelerated, it still couldn’t completely pull away from Rochefort, but he wasn’t closing in on them so quickly now. Their Flygear was nearing the rimebound Prismar and its swarm of magicite beasts, but they couldn’t outrun the bloodthirsty person on their flank.

“Ugh! We’re not gonna make it!” Rafael strained as he urged himself to go faster.

“Just a little bit more! Somehow—!” Eris encouraged.

Rochefort was almost upon them. “Ha ha ha ha! This game of tag is over now!”

Just then, a bullet of dark light shot past them, grazing Rochefort in the leg.

“Agh!” He suddenly tilted in the air, slowing down and letting them open up a small gap.

“Eris! Rafael! I’m here to help!”

“Ripple!”

“Lady Ripple!”

Ripple had opened fire as she closed in. It hadn’t been a solid hit, but the gravitational force of the “eye” did throw him off-balance and slow him down.

“Sorry, but could you lend me your strength?” Ripple spoke to the Flygear which had carried her here. With its prow aimed straight at

Rochefort and its engines at full speed, she leaped from the aircraft, leaving it to perform one last kamikaze strike.

Blammmmmmm!

It crashed into Rochefort's golden shield and broke apart with a mighty roar. "Aaaagh!" Rochefort was slowed further, to a stop. Ripple, having abandoned her aircraft, nimbly leaped toward her allies' Flygear.

"Thanks! Good timing!" Eris said.

"I saw what was going on! You two are in such a pickle!"

"Yes," Rafael responded, "but thanks to you, we'll make it." As he spoke, the Flygear entered the swarm of magicite beasts.

"You're not getting away! I won't let you!" Rochefort roared as he dove into the swarm in pursuit. The stray energy unleashed by his shield swept through beast after beast around him, obliterating them. The swath of destruction it left behind was far wider and more powerful than even Rafael's recent assault.

"It's working!" Rafael said. "He really is fearsome, though..."

"But we don't know how long he can keep it up!" Ripple said.

"You were right, Rafael!" Eris agreed with him. "If we let him and the magicite beasts wear each other down..."

It was easier to hide among the magicite beasts than it had been shortly before. At some point, Rochefort would have burned through his energy—and by then, hopefully the beasts would be wiped out as well.

"You're trying to hide trees in a forest—!" Rochefort yelled, stopping in place and raising his shield.

"He stopped?" Rafael asked.

"What—" Ripple gasped, stopping short as Eris finished her sentence, "—is he doing?!"

The shield gleamed even brighter, its light forming a sphere around Rochefort. "I'll blow the whole forest away!" he finished.

Skreeeeeeeeech!

The light exploded out from him as the sound echoed. The magicite beasts touched by it crumbled and evaporated.

"How can he still fire something like that?!" Rafael shouted.

"It's so fast!" Ripple panicked.

"Oh no!" Eris cried. "We can't get away from it!"

The light spread swiftly, closing in on them.

"Ahhhhhhh!"

As they were swallowed by the light, a fierce shock sent them

flying. Rafael's vision went dark for a moment—then his back smashed into something.

Krshhhh!

At the same time, he heard a smash. Glimmering things filled his vision as he felt a chill. "Is this...? Is this the Prismer's ice?!" Rafael had fallen into the ice encasing the rimebound Prismer.

"Ugh..." Eris muttered.

"Owwie!" Ripple yelped.

They too had been caught by the Prismer's ice. It was fair to say that it had broken their fall relatively softly.

Ironically, the Prismer, their greatest foe, had saved them. "I can't believe it—you're supposed to be our enemy!" Rafael gazed at the Prismer, still trapped in its ice. He had landed near its head, and its gigantic, prismatic eyes—now, they seemed to glitter as they gazed back.

"Wh—?!" Rafael gasped. He was sure of it. They'd just made eye contact! "Lady Eris! Lady Ripple! Did you see that? The Prismer just looked at me!"

"Y-Yes! I saw it!" Eris said. "It's almost fully awakened!"

"Oh no!" Ripple gasped. "It's waking up!"

But Rochefort wasn't stopping. "Now, let me finish you off!"

"Stop! Don't disturb the Prismer any further! You'll trigger its awakening! If it thinks you're attacking it, it'll counter!" Rafael protested.

"Smashing you both at once solves that problem!" As Rochefort wound up a finishing blow—

Crassshhhhhh!

With a monumental noise, the ice encasing the Prismer shattered. The shock, which felt as though it had exploded from within, sent Rafael and the others flying forward wildly from the ice. They eventually hit the ground, bouncing a few times before coming to a halt an astonishing distance away.

"Gaaah...! I-It's—! This is—!" Rafael stammered.

"Ah! The Prismer—!" Eris gasped.

"It's awake!" Ripple yelled in horror.

They were on the ground before a tremendous bird, its body shining all the colors of the rainbow. It was beautiful, it was sublime, but it was a holy knight or a hial menace's greatest enemy. Now was the time to take the true power of a hial menace to hand and fight!

That would cost Rafael's life. But he had made up his mind to do

so. Ever since the day he had become a holy knight, he had lived knowing that this day too would come. It wasn't that he wanted to lose his life. He wanted to see Rafinha and Inglis grow up with his own eyes. He wanted to do his best for Ymir, while being a loyal son to his parents.

But even though he had those hopes, far more important were the hopes of all humanity embodied in holy knights and hial menaces. It was through that fervent belief that he made his decision.

"Lady Eris! Lady Ripple! If it's come to this, let us fight with you as weapons! With the Prismer revived, we must not hesitate!"

"W-Wait, Rafael!" Eris stuttered. "Don't rush into this! We have time to be careful and assess the situation!"

"That's right!" Ripple agreed. "There's no guarantee the Prismer's gonna go straight toward a town! Let's wait until the last minute!"

"But if we don't take the Prismer down here, there's a chance it'll do a lot of damage!"

"I don't want you to cast aside your life on a maybe!" Eris barked back. "Please understand—it's too soon!"

"That's right!" Ripple said. "And besides—!"

Watching them, Rochefort laughed. "Ha ha ha ha ha! Spineless, aren't you! Watch this, you weaklings! We'll crush that Prismer! You'll owe me your lives, and you'll worship me until you draw your last breath on your deathbed!" He aimed the focus of his attack at the birdlike Prismer, and rushed in with his glittering shield held high.

"Run away! Leave this to us and get out of here!" Ripple heard echo in her head.

"Huh?! Did you just hear something! It was the voice from before... It wants us to leave this to them and run away!"

"No, I didn't hear anything!" Rafael insisted.

"I didn't hear it either!" Eris said.

If it's telling us to leave it to them, it has to be, Ripple thought.

It can't be Rochefort. It must be the hial menace transformed into the shield in his hands. I'd love to ask her why she's telling us this, but now isn't really the time to chat.

"Take this!" Rochefort had closed in on the Prismer.

Recognizing his attack, it turned its gaze on him. And the shine in its rainbow eyes intensified—trying to block his path, the Prismer sent forth rainbow-colored crystals thrusting from the ground.

"That won't stop me!"

Krsh! Krssshhh! Krrrshsh!

Rochefort broke through them as he advanced on the Prismer. He bashed his raised shield into it with a loud *smack!* As it struggled

against the Prismer's power, the shield glowed brightly and began to carve into the gigantic beast's body.

"It's working?!" Rafael exclaimed.

"But...! If that's all he's got—!" Eris began.

"—this might be bad!" Ripple finished.

"What do you mean?!" Rafael asked.

Squawwwwwk!

Before Eris or Ripple could answer Rafael's question, the Prismer cried and spread its wings.

"Gaaah!" The force of the Prismer's reaction sent Rochefort flying backward, but he quickly righted himself midair and risked another attack. His swift movement accurately struck again at the Prismer's wound.

Fshhhhhh!

However, his follow-up attack didn't deepen the wound. In fact, it wasn't just *ineffective*; it actively helped the Prismer, which absorbed the power. It healed before their eyes.

"Wh-Whaaaaaaaat?!" Rochefort's eyes went wide. "What is this beast?!" Sensing the situation he was in, he stepped back for a moment. He honestly wasn't fighting with abandon—he was fighting on wild *instinct*. Yet this display was clearly an uncanny phenomenon.

"I knew it!" Eris said. "It's like before—no, even more so!"

"Yeah," Ripple agreed. "I don't remember it starting to absorb things that quickly last time!"

"Did it get even stronger while it was sleeping?!"

"What do you two mean?!" Rafael interjected in haste.

"That Prismer is an extremely quick learner!" Eris explained. "It remembers our attacks, and it becomes more and more resistant to them!"

"Eventually, it learns how to absorb attacks!" Ripple added.

"That's why we weren't able to finish it off the last time it appeared!"

"At this point, the shield won't do anything to it anymore! Without a different attack—!"

"He's got the light that blew away the swarm of magicite beasts and probably other attacks, but...but those won't work more than once or twice! It looks like it's learning even faster than last time!"

"Then we need to join forces with him and attack!" Rafael suggested. "It's our only option!"

Eris and Ripple shook their heads. "No! We need to stop him and work out a plan together!" Eris insisted.

“Yeah!” Ripple agreed. “If he keeps going, everything that shield can do will stop working!”

“But if we wait that long, he’ll burn away all his power!” Rafael protested. “Look how much he’s using! Right now is our only chance to fight alongside him!”

As they debated, innumerable magicite beasts began to appear around them. Not just birds, but animals, insects, and beasts of every sort appeared one after another around the Prismer.

Rafael inhaled sharply. “What’s going on?!”

“The Prismer is embodying the Prism Flow itself!” Eris explained.

“So every animal around it is getting turned into a magicite beast!” Ripple added.

“Then before long this place will...” Rafael began.

The Prismer suddenly began to shine brightly, with a glow very much like that of Rochefort’s shield.

“You bastard! Are you using the same light as—?!” As Rochefort spoke in utter abhorrence, the light born from the Prismer became countless bullets which rained out over the area.

Rat-tat-tat!

The magicite beasts were decimated, the landscape became a cratered wasteland, and the rain of fire approached Rafael, Eris, and Ripple. The fearsome might of each shot, their speed, their precision—this was an attack they could not avoid!

“Rafael!” Eris and Ripple covered Rafael with themselves, tensing as one of the Prismer’s shots struck.

That was the last thing Rafael saw before losing consciousness.

Chapter II: Inglis, Age 15—The Eastern Front (2)

The Highland Archlord Evel had turned the ancient dragon Fufailbane, who had once slumbered beneath this land, into a mechanical ancient dragon, and departed from the lands surrounding Leclair's ruins. His plan of manipulating Alcard into attacking Karelia had been only a secondary objective compared to obtaining the ancient dragon, and with that complete, he had returned to Highland unperturbed about lesser matters. The dragon's presence had provided a temporary relief to the food shortage, but his might was also far beyond what Lahti and the people of Alcard could muster, which had left him a threatening loose end.

Thus, the absence of both Fufailbane and the scheming Evel led the locals to breathe a sigh of relief. Only Inglis, bereft of a chance to fight the mechanical ancient dragon, was pained by their leaving, but she also had something to look forward to.

Two urgent reports had suddenly arrived at the camp.

The first was that Alcardian forces previously stationed at the Karelian border were now approaching Leclair.

The second was that far away, on the eastern borders of Karelia, the war front against Venefic had begun to collapse; the Prismers that the Paladins had relocated to the eastern border was pushing back the Karelian forces. The Prismers appeared to be advancing toward Chiral.

Upon learning of this, Rafinha had insisted that her brother, the holy knight Rafael, and the hiral menaces stationed with him, Eris and Ripple, would surely be able to handle the situation well on their own. She believed their group should complete their duties in Leclair first—that is, that they should prioritize dealing with the Alcardian forces marching on them.

Inglis, however, shook her head in disagreement. It was extremely rare for her to disagree with Rafinha once her cousin had made up her mind, so Rafinha reacted with shock. "I'm surprised you're picking the option that will give you fewer fights, Chris. Or are you worried that Rafael will take down the Prismers without you if you don't hurry? I already told you, we're the ones who can protect the people here, so that's what we need to do! Okay?!"

"No, Rani, that's not okay. That's *very* not okay."

"Chris...? You always want me to decide what to do... Did I do

something to upset you?"

"That's not what I meant. Just...Eris and Ripple want me there. That's why we need to hurry."

The messenger had *not* said that Rafael had been killed in action. If he had, that surely would have been the biggest news. From that, Inglis thought she could deduce a bit more about the situation.

First, Rafael was safe. Second, the Prismer, now active again, was advancing on Chiral. If Rafael had taken a transformed hialal menace as his weapon and fought to stop the Prismer, the tidings would have been one of two things: "The holy knight has died in battle, but he stopped the Prismer," or "The holy knight has died in battle, and he failed to stop the Prismer." There would be no possibility of a different message.

Since it was neither, Rafael hadn't yet committed to a decisive battle with the Prismer. The farther the Prismer advanced toward Chiral, the more damage it would cause. Inglis had known Rafael since she was a baby in her new life, and he was a mature, levelheaded guy, but definitely not the type to sit back and watch the Prismer do its worst. Inglis could just imagine Eris and Ripple trying their hardest to hold him back, doing their best to keep the damage to a minimum while they waited for her to arrive and destroy it.

That way, Rafael won't have to die. That's the one ray of hope they're betting on. To me, he's family. And even more importantly, if anything happens to him, Rafinha will be heartbroken. It would haunt her for the rest of her life. I can't let that happen to her.

"They want you there? Why? Once a Prismer's active, the longer you let it go, the more damage it does!" Rafinha didn't understand.

"So you mean Lady Eris and Lady Ripple are avoiding a full-on fight with the Prismer?" Leone asked. "But why?"

"Now that I think of it..." Liselotte interjected. "When the larval Prismer appeared in Chiral, neither Lady Ripple nor the principal had a kind ear for Silva's request for Ripple to transform, nor did Leone's brother take a shine to the idea. In the end, Inglis intervened and it became irrelevant..."

"She did make quite the entrance, knocking him out...but maybe she had a reason beyond just wanting to fight it herself?" Leone reasoned.

"Chris! Are you hiding something from me?! What is it?!" Rafinha demanded.

"Well..." Inglis trailed off, unsure of what to say.

Trying to hide it any longer would be pointless. Inglis figured the truth would have a significant impact on Rafinha's decision here. If she knew, Inglis doubted she'd be able to prioritize dealing with the Alcardian force led by Lahti's brother, Prince Windsel. If she knew and

still insisted on staying, Inglis would go along with it, but...

At any rate, she can't make a proper decision until she knows the full details of the situation. I need to make sure she gets the truth.

"Yeah. Sorry, Rani. There's something I haven't told you, but before I do..." It had been better to stay quiet until now. Inglis turned her eyes toward Lahti's knights—no, beyond them, to one of the civilians nearby. "Sorry, Leon, but could you explain to Rani and the others what Eris and Ripple are thinking?"

"Huuuh?!" Rafinha and the other girls gawked in surprise.

The man she called out to slumped his shoulders, accepting his defeat. "Saw right through me, didn't ya? I'm impressed you could figure it out so easily. This is probably putting it a bit bluntly for a cute girl like you, but you're like an animal." As Leon pulled back his hood to reveal his face, his familiar wry grin emerged.



"I pride myself on sensing the powerful," Inglis answered with a grin of her own.

"Give it a rest. I'm not gonna fight you."

"Unfortunately, those weren't my plans either." *Good timing he has, though*, Inglis thought. *Having someone here to back up my story will make Rafinha and the others more likely to accept it.*

"Leon?! Incredible, it really is him!" Liselotte gasped.

"Brother! When did you worm your way in here?!" Leone yelled.

"Just a little while ago," Leon replied. "You kids were having so much fun, I thought it'd be a shame to interrupt, but maybe it's a good thing she spotted me." In other words, he had probably arrived around the same time as the messengers.

"I was under the impression that the Steelblood Front had decided not to intervene in Alcard, though?" Inglis asked.

"Well, kind of. I'm not here because of Alcard. The boss sent me here because of you."

"And how can I help you today?"

"Half of it's already done. You just heard what's happening with the eastern front. As for the rest...the Steelblood Front's stepped in to handle the Prismers' magicite beasts that the knights can't, but you know. May as well be spitting into the wind if we don't deal with the Prismers themselves. And that's why the boss wants you. More specifically, he wanted me to find you and bring you to him. You ready to go? Ride's here." Leon pointed up at the sky, where a large ship's shadow was emerging from the clouds.

"I see. That's certainly quite kind of you, but I'm going to have to ask you to wait a moment. We need to explain things to Rani and the others first."

"Yeah, sure. Just try not to take *too* long. We're short on time. Oh, and I know it probably doesn't mean much coming from me, but...help Rafael. Please."

"Of course. That was my plan. Rani, everyone, shall we go somewhere without listening ears?" Inglis pointed to the cabin where they'd been barracked. "And maybe you too, Leon?"

"Nah, thanks, but I'll pass. Doesn't seem like it's gonna be a very fun conversation. Instead, I'm gonna head up and get ready for departure. Just...everyone, what Inglis is about to tell you is one hundred percent true. Pay attention, even if it hurts." Having said his piece, Leon turned on his heel and left.

"He wants you to help Rafael?" Rafinha asked, her voice turning soft. "I mean, I guess fighting alongside him would be helpful, but..."

"That is something to consider," Leone said.

"Indeed," Liselotte agreed. "But anyway, let's get going."

Another voice rang out from overhead, interrupting them. “Lady Inglis! Lady Ingliiis!” It was a deep, booming male voice. Inglis recognized it, and the face it emanated from.

“Reddas?!”

Reddas, captain of Karelia’s Royal Guard, had appeared on a Flygear.

“I can’t believe even he’s here,” Rafinha mused, surprised.

“The captain of the Royal Guard...” Leone said.

“Why in the world is he here?” Liselotte asked.

Reddas was a surprisingly friendly man for someone with his looks and had an unusual reverence for Inglis, but his position as captain of the Royal Guard was in no doubt. Acting as a messenger was far below him. This was unusual.

“Ahh, Lady Inglis! I’ve been looking so hard for you! But simply beholding your beauty wipes away all the exhaustion!”

“Ha ha ha...uh, thanks,” Inglis replied. “When you say you were looking for me, is it about the matter of the Prismers awakening?”

“Ah, so that news has already reached here! Indeed, Lady Inglis! But the special orders I bear are from before that!”

“From before? What do you mean?”

“The two hial menaces, having determined that the Prismers was likely to awaken soon, requested your presence on the front lines!”

“Eris and Ripple? I see...” Inglis’s deduction from the first messenger’s report that Eris and Ripple were waiting for her had been correct. Not only that, the call had come before the Prismers had actually awakened—though she had received the news in the other order.

“After receiving the news from Prince Wayne and Ambassador Theodore, His Majesty ordered that it be done. I was chosen to transmit such a weighty order that it not be forgotten—though I apologize for taking so long to find you.”

“No, you did well. Thank you.” Inglis bowed politely to Reddas.

“Huh, Chris, you were right! Eris and Ripple really do want you!” Rafinha remarked.

“And the Steelblood Front is calling for you as well...” Leone said.

“It seems you’re quite popular, Inglis,” Liselotte said.

“I suppose. Fufailbane and Evel didn’t seem to be very interested, so I’m glad there’s *someone* who wants me.”

“Just what is it about you that makes you the first choice for something with implications to the country as serious as a Prismers?” Rafinha asked. “I don’t get it.”

“It’s because I’m not bound by anything, you know? That’s what they need. Eris, Ripple, even Rafael,” Inglis said.

“Huh?” Inglis’s soft smile was met with looks of confusion from

the other girls. And from Reddas—presumably he didn't know the truth either.

"Anyway, there's something I need to tell you all. Let's go." Inglis led Rafinha and the others into the house they were staying in.



After Inglis explained the true nature of hial menaces and holy knights, Reddas's shock echoed in the room. "Wh-What?! Is that true, Lady Inglis?!"

"Yes, it is. I'm sure of it. I understand why you may have your doubts, but..."

"It is true that in all the stories I've heard, the holy knight has died after the battle with the Prismer—but I thought it was simply because of how intense the battle was, and that my brother Silva would fight well enough to provide a counterexample."

"It's not like that. To Highland, holy knights strong enough to defeat a Prismer must be put down before they can bare fangs against Highland as well," Inglis explained. "The surface is their garden, and they keep it well pruned by not only destroying the Prismer but also the holy knight who embodies the surface countries' ultimate strength—it's a clever plan, one that enforces the status-quo relationship between the surface and Highland."

Reddas grunted in disdain. "Lady Inglis, are you saying that the hial menaces who are our guardians are also, to my brother Silva, reapers here to take his life?!"

"You could say that. And, I believe, that is why the number of people who know the truth is kept to a minimum. If this were widely known, the hial menaces would be resented, even opposed, which would be a matter of concern for the rulers of the country. As a practical matter, there is no way to protect the countries of the surface other than with hial menaces—so, to ensure unity, it is far preferable that they are revered as guardians. That not even you, the captain of the Royal Guard, know of this is proof in itself. I imagine the information is limited to holy knights themselves and the royal family."

"But that's—Lady Inglis, even if it's you saying it, I can't bring myself to believe it so easily."

"But, Sir Reddas," Liselotte interjected warily, "i-it must be true. Remember what Leone's brother—what Leon said just now. That what Inglis was about to tell us was true. He knew immediately what she was going to talk about."

"Yeah. That's right, Liselotte," Inglis confirmed.

"I... Leon... I didn't know... I had no idea..." Leone stared at the floor, her voice wavering.

“He must have decided that such an arrangement couldn’t truly protect the people of the surface. Holy knights may be able to protect the people from Prismers, yes, but not from Highland or the Highlanders,” Inglis explained.

“Y-Yes, I suppose... Ah, how I wish he had come with us...” Leone clenched her trembling hands in front of her chest.

Inglis couldn’t see Leone’s face, tilted down as it was, but she was sure that the girl was trying her hardest to hold back tears. “But he did cause trouble for you, and for the people of Ahlemin. I think he just thought he couldn’t face you after that.”

“That’s so like him. He always acts so frivolous, but he’s actually incredibly sincere.”

“Yeah.” Inglis smiled and placed a hand on Leone’s shoulder. As she did, Liselotte reached from the other side, and their hands overlapped. “Rafael is a little bit different from Leon. I think he believes—even if it doesn’t change things with Highland—if a Prismer appears, someone has to fight and protect the people from it. Neither of them is right or wrong; they just look at it differently. They both understand that about the other. That’s why Rafael doesn’t hold a grudge against Leon, and that’s why Leon said he wants us to help Rafael.”

“R-Right...” Leone mumbled, nodding deeply.

“They carry such burdens we never knew about...” Liselotte remarked.

Rafinha, meanwhile, silently hugged Inglis.

“Rani... That must have shocked you. I know it’s a hard thing to hear. Are you okay?” Inglis asked.

“I’m sorry, Chris,” she said meekly.

“Huh?”

“It must have been rough to keep this a secret. I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you.”

“Rani...thank you. That’s so kind.”

Rafinha must have been shocked to hear such dire news hitting so close to home, yet she still took the opportunity to show concern about how it affected others. Inglis was glad Rafinha had grown up kind and true to herself—glad, and proud as a self-described ersatz grandparent.

“I’m fine. Sorry for hiding it all this time. Ripple asked me to, so...” Inglis added.

“Well...that part does make me a little bit mad.” Rafinha’s embrace of Inglis tightened sharply.

“Ow! C-C’mon, I’ll make it up to you!”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. That’s why Eris and Ripple are calling for me, right?

I'm not bound by anything. So if I defeat the Prismers, Rafael doesn't have to die. No one has to feel that pain. I'm sure it's hurt Eris and Ripple to watch holy knights die over and over. And I'm not exactly complaining about the chance to prioritize fighting a powerful foe. So it works out for everyone."



“That’s so like you, Chris!” Rafinha snapped out of her dejected slump. A few drying tears remained, but her expression had regained its usual brightness. “I’m not really sure what being *pleased* about the situation says about you, but I guess let’s fight fire with fire!”

“Well, that isn’t very polite, but yeah, I’m going to take down that Prismer with the sword Fufailbane gave me.” Inglis chuckled to herself. “It’s nothing but a big fat magicite beast anyway!”

A mighty sword forged from the scales of an ancient dragon—a Prismer would make a perfect first foe for it. Magicite beasts really did make great enemies. They held a single-minded focus for fighting—not like Fufailbane or Evel, with their scheming and plotting to avoid disadvantageous battles.

“I, uh, don’t think Mr. Dragon *gave* you it.”

“Right, right, more like you took it from him by force,” Leone observed.

“I do suppose that’s fighting fire with fire,” Liselotte said. “Ancient dragons are dangerous beings.”

“That’s the thing with your approach, Chris! Everyone gets burned!”

“Sheesh, why are you all being so mean!” Inglis complained. “Ah well, I guess that means you’re feeling better. Anyway, then, what shall we do? This was my reason for suggesting we should return quickly, but...”

Rafinha now knew the truth about holy knights. Inglis would suggest heading back to Karelia now, but if Rafinha decided against it, she’d acquiesce.

“Hmm...” Rafinha’s brow furrowed.

Leone spoke up. “There’s no need to worry about it, Rafinha! Return right away!”

“Leone... But—!”

“I understand your concern! Liselotte and I will remain here to try and deal with the Alcardian army! We’ll split up, with you and Inglis returning now! Okay, Liselotte?”

“Precisely! If you hadn’t said so, I would have myself!” Liselotte added.

“Thanks, both of you...” Rafinha began.

“If you hurry, you’ll make it in time! You can save Rafael! If you do, I’m sure it will lighten Leon’s guilt,” Leone said.

“Thanks!” Rafinha responded. “Then, the two of us will head back to Karelia. Lahti, Pullum, I’m sorry we couldn’t see this through with you!”

Lahti shook his head. “No, I’m just grateful for everything you’ve done for us. I wish we could all go together to Karelia.”

“Inglis, Rafinha, take care!” Pullum said. “Once you take care of the Prismer, come back to Alcard! I’ll make sure there are plenty of treats!”

“Well, that’s something to look forward to! Right, Chris?”

“Yeah, we definitely can’t lose!”

Inglis and Rafinha nodded to each other, then turned to Reddas, who was waiting nearby. “All right, Reddas. Let’s hurry back to Karelia.”

“Yes! Thank you, Lady Inglis! Then, we should stop by the camp where Duke Bilford is stationed and change to a clipper—”

“No, that won’t be necessary. We have a ride.”

Vrrrm... Vrrrm... Vrrrm...

As if responding to Inglis, the throb of an engine sounded from above the roof. The Steelblood Front ship that Leon had brought had come down to meet them.

“And there it is now. Let’s go, Rani. Reddas, you too.” Inglis led them outside, where they saw a hovering battleship above them, large enough to cast the entire camp in shadow.

“Ah?!” Reddas gasped. “This is a Highland—”

“The one the Steelblood Front captured when Lord Evel visited the palace.” They had repaired it and were using it for their own ends. Of the ships available to the knights of Karelia, probably only Ambassador Theodore’s personal vessel was a match.

They were as well equipped as the royal forces.

“The Steelblood Front?! N-No, Inglis! To think you’ve joined forces with such knaves!”

“Any port in a storm. Our first priority is carrying out His Majesty’s orders, is it not?”

“B-But if we board that ship, the enemy will have us in the palm of their hand! We don’t know when they might decide to attack us!”

“And if they do, I’ll be grateful. It’ll be a good warm-up while we travel. I’ve been wanting to try out my new sword anyway.”

Reddas sighed. “So bold as always, Lady Inglis. Understood. I shall accompany you no matter the risk!”

“Of course. Let’s go—Rani, you’re okay with this, right?”

“Yeah,” Rafinha said. “But...maybe it would be faster if we took the *Star Princess*?”

“It’d be slower with three aboard. And even with just two, I don’t think it would hold up to full speed all the way back to Karelia. It’d work for the last leg, but to an extent I think it’s better if we stow it on this ship. And besides...”

“Yeah?”

“A ship that big can haul *that*.” Inglis’s eyes turned to the area outside the camp where Leone and Liselotte had set up their butcher shop. There, a fresh dragon tail, cut not too long ago, lay imposingly.

“Fresh meat?! You mean you want to bring the whole thing?!”

“Yeah. If we get it there fast, it’ll still be good. Let’s bring it back with us and feed it to Rafael.”

“That’s a great idea! I just know he’ll love it!”

“All right, then! Let’s get it right back to him!”

With that decided, they took no time at all to prepare for departure.

“Let’s go, Rani!”

“Yeah! Just wait, Rafael! We’ll help you, and even bring back Mr. Dragon’s tasty meat as a souvenir!”

Inglis and Rafinha nodded to each other, serious expressions on their faces. Inglis had the whole dragon tail slung over her shoulder, Rafinha held a large amount of dragon jerky. Even Reddas was pressed into service as a porter for more of the jerky.

“The look on her face doesn’t match the rest of her at all,” Lahti remarked.

“Well, she’s always like that. And bringing such a souvenir to Rafael really shows how enthusiastic she is to help,” Leone said.

“Yeah, it is just like them. Probably beats showing up all gloomy, right?”

“They’ll be fine!” Pullum said. “And then, we need to make sure they don’t regret going on ahead!”

As the remaining onlookers watched, the cargo bay of the Steelblood Front’s flying battleship opened, and a face peered out. “Wow, you’ve sure got some luggage! Hold on a minute, we’ll bring it down!”

“No need, we’re in a hurry! Could you stand back for a moment, though?” Inglis asked.

“Huh? What are you gonna— Ahhhh?!”

When the Steelblood Front fighter responded, Inglis had already begun to sprint, still carrying the dragon tail. As she did, she looked back at Leone and the others. “See you all at the knights’ academy! Haaaaah!” Leaping forcefully, as if the dragon’s tail were weightless, she nimbly soared into the sky—and into the cargo hold of the ship.

Thuuud!

The impact of her landing made the entire ship sway.

“Ahhhhh!”

“She... She jumped?! Carrying that huge thing?!”

“That wasn’t something a human’s capable of! No wonder our

leader wanted her!”

Inglis politely bowed to the shocked Steelblood Front fighters. “I’d appreciate it if you could carry this to Karelia for me.”

“Uh, sure...?”

“Looking at her close-up...”

“Wow, she’s really cute. Maybe even cuter than Sistia.”

Leon emerged from among the men. “C’mon, don’t let Sistia hear you say that. She’s not a big fan of Inglis.”

“I don’t particularly mind her, though...” Inglis remarked.

“You know Sistia, always itching for a fight.”

“Indeed. And I do so enjoy being around belligerent people.”

Leon laughed. “You haven’t changed. Good. That’s just what we need right now.”

Rafinha appeared in front of them on the *Star Princess*, bringing it into the hold as she followed Inglis. “Leon! Shouldn’t you be talking to Leone? You can still—!”

“Nah, we’re in a race against time here. If I don’t get you there fast— Anyway, I don’t really think I can face her yet. No matter how I try to patch things up, she’s been through a lot because of me, right? Even if she knows why, she’s got a purpose—taking me down and redeeming our family’s name. I don’t wanna take that away from her too. I haven’t been a very good brother.” Leon scratched the back of his head in embarrassment, turning away from Inglis and Rafinha.

“It’s okay. She told me that no matter what reasons you had, she was still determined to defeat you,” Rafinha said.

“Er, Rani?” Inglis interjected. “I don’t remember Leone saying that.” Looking, she could see Rafinha shushing her.

“I see... Well, I guess that’s fine. She still has that,” Leon said.

“I was kidding,” Rafinha said.

“Huh?!” Leon blurted out.

“She told us she wanted us to hurry—that if we help Rafael, it would ease your guilt too.”

“Ah...! So she—”

“Which would you prefer it to be?” Rafinha smiled as she asked Leon teasingly.

“C’mon, don’t ask me questions like that.” Leon threw his hands up in exasperation.

“Leave helping Rafael to us. But...even if right now isn’t the time, I want you to give Leone a good apology and make up! Okay?!”

“Rafinha—”

“Well, it’s going to be less ‘us’ and more just Chris, but whatever!”

“No, that’s fine, Rani,” Inglis said. “You can use my power as you will. And doesn’t that make it your power too?”

Leon laughed. “You two get along so well. Yeah, Rafinha, I hope

things turn out like that.”

“Great!” Rafinha cheered. “Anyway, let’s get going! Full speed ahead!”

“Come on, Rani. They’re being kind enough to bring us home,” Inglis reminded her.

“Nah, it’s fine,” Leon said. “There’s something about Rafinha that makes me want to listen to what she has to say.” Leon turned to the fighters around him, and raised his voice to give the order. “All right, let’s go! Cast off!”

“Aye-aye!” In response, the Steelblood Front fighters scattered to their stations.

“Anyway, let me show you to your cabin,” Leon began. “But first—here.” He handed Inglis and Rafinha each a folded square of thick black fabric.

“What’s this?” Inglis asked.

“The same uniform as everyone else here. That’s the women’s version. You won’t draw as much attention around here in those. Try ’em on if you feel like it. Or just trash ’em otherwise.”

“Well...Chris, should we?” Rafinha asked. “They’re nice, but...”

While they were working together for now, the Steelblood Front was an anti-Highland guerrilla band. From the perspective of a knight of Karelia, they must be suppressed. Rafinha was worried about whether it was really okay to wear their uniform, even if just for a short time. Nonetheless, she definitely liked the design and wanted to try it on. She was hesitant, but she’d still said they were nice.

“I think it’s fine. The clothes themselves didn’t do anything wrong, after all.” Even Inglis found the uniform pleasing to look at, and she *did really* enjoy trying on new clothes.

She was looking forward to admiring herself in the mirror later.

Chapter III: Inglis, Age 15—The Eastern Front (3)

“Nnn...ugh...”

When Rafael’s consciousness returned, he could make out the hazy image of a round peephole-like window. Through it, he saw only the color blue. “The sky...? I’m on a ship?! Wait, what happened to the Prismer?!”

Then came the realization that he had to be back aboard Ambassador Theodore’s ship, which served as the Paladins’ base for this operation, staring through a porthole. The last thing he remembered was—during the battle with Rochefort—the birdlike Prismer had broken free of its ice and fired countless blasts of light.

“Ah, Rafael! Thank goodness, you’re awake!” Eris exclaimed.

“Are you feeling okay? Anything hurt?” Ripple asked. They were both in the cabin with him. They’d probably been looking after him.

“I’m fine. Thanks for protecting me.” They were worried about him, but they were in a sorry state themselves. Ripple’s neck and arm were bandaged, and Eris wore an eye patch. They had both leaped in front to guard him from the Prismer’s attack. It was thanks to them that he was safe and sound.

“We’ll be fine. Hial menaces are tough! Wait a little bit, and we’ll be all better!” Ripple cheered.

“Yes, please don’t concern yourself over us,” Eris agreed. “We look a lot worse than we feel. We’re just covering our wounds so those around us aren’t worried. They have no effect on our mobility.”

Rafael paused, uncertain. “Oh...thank you both. Er, how long have I been unconscious?”

“You’ve been out for...around seven days?” Ripple said.

“Yes, that sounds about right,” Eris agreed.

“A whole week?! So long away from my duties—with the Prismer active?! What happened after I passed out?!”

“The Prismer is advancing toward the capital. It doesn’t seem to be in any hurry, so we’re staying in its path, staging a slow retreat while we keep an eye on it.”

“So far, there aren’t any cities in its path,” Ripple chipped in. “So I guess maybe there isn’t likely to be much significant damage...”

“I...I see,” Rafael said. “But the Prismer is like a mass of Prism Flow—are magicite beasts created by that overflowing into the

surrounding area and attacking towns and villages?"

"Yes, that's been happening," Eris confirmed. "The Paladins have split up into a number of squads and are clearing the magicite beasts reaching the villages near the Prismer's path under Prince Wayne and Ambassador Theodore's command."

"I see... Are our forces sufficient?"

"Things are okay," Ripple said. "For now, we...kind of have backup?"

"What do you mean by 'backup,' Lady Ripple?" Rafael asked.

"The Steelblood Front. They seem to be hunting the magicite beasts that the Prismer generates—thinning their numbers."

"The Steelblood Front?! Is...is that okay?!"

"Any port in a storm,' the prince and the ambassador agreed," Eris pointed out. "I was a bit conflicted at first, but I can see their point. We took heavy losses in that last fight, so the Paladins alone are insufficient to protect the people."

"All right," Rafael said. "Then I guess we can count on them for now—Chris and Rani said that they have a hialer menace too. And there's Leon..."

"Yes..." Eris agreed.

"See? It'll be fine!" Ripple said. "We've gotta look forward, not back!" She couldn't help but try to keep everyone's spirits up, and Rafael found himself smiling and nodding.

"Yes, Lady Ripple! By the way, what became of him...of Rochefort?"

"I don't know... He got blown away by the same attack that got us, and I didn't see after. No clue where the rest of Venefic's forces ended up either."

"Wielding a transformed hialer menace like that, there's no real question about what happened to him," Eris pointed out. "I assume their forces fell back to their own lands after losing their general."

"I see," Rafael said. "I wonder why he chose to do something so suicidal?"

"I don't understand. He didn't even seem to be in a clear state of mind," Eris agreed.

"Yeah...he was a mess. That outburst of his probably woke up the Prismer," Ripple said.

"I wonder why he was able to receive a hialer menace's blessing..." Rafael said. "I thought unless their hearts were as one, she couldn't transform into a weapon..."

"That would suggest their hialer menace accepted his choice of actions," Eris pointed out.

"It didn't seem that way to me," Rafael said.

"I'm not sure, since she'd transformed by the time I arrived, but..."

“Same here,” Ripple said. “What’s she like?”

“Her name is Arles. She’s a demihuman like you, Ripple, but she seemed completely different, more melancholy...” Rafael explained.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ripple asked. “Are you saying I’m too flippant?”

“Ah, er...! It’s just... I thought most demihumans had an upbeat personality like yours.”

“Well, that depends on the person, you know! But...oh, right! Her telepathy!”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Remember how I told you I heard a voice no one else did when Eris and I went to check on the Prismers? That must have been that Arles girl’s telepathy. We’re both demihumans, so it must have been —”

“Oh, right, the way you communicate.”

Previously, Ripple’s telepathy had been used to lure the magicite beasts—which had once been demihumans—into a trap. Here, though, it was functioning as it should, letting them communicate even at a distance.

“Yeah. I thought I was the sole demihuman left, so I didn’t realize. So there is another demihuman hial menace...”

“You heard Lady Arles’s voice? What did she have to say?”

“She wanted us to run away...like she was worried about us.”

“So Lady Arles was concerned about what Rochefort was doing?”

“Yeah. At least, I think so.”

“I don’t get it...” Rafael slumped and shook his head.

“Huh?”

“What do you mean?” Eris asked.

“Then why...?” Rafael continued. “Why could Rochefort transform her into a weapon? That’s supposed to be the ultimate power, only available when one’s heart unites with that of a hial menace—if she was worried about you, Ripple, I can’t see how their wills would align.”

“Wills aligning isn’t the only way hearts can be as one,” Eris pointed out.

“That’s right,” Ripple agreed. “But it’s kind of sad. She must still be young... I don’t mean physically—I mean *here*.” Ripple patted her chest, to indicate what lay below—her heart.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Rafael asked.

The two hial menaces were silent, a bit taken aback by Rafael’s naivete in this department. He was an appealing young man—proper, kind, compassionate, self-sacrificing, the picture of a hero—but so naive.

“Anyway, let’s leave it at that,” Rafael said. “There’s no point in

dwelling on it—we'll never see Rochefort again. I'm more concerned about our own situation."

"Yeah. I wish I'd gotten to talk more with Arles, though..." Ripple said.

"Hial menaces don't die," Eris said. "Someday, we may yet again face her and her new holy knight."

"Yeah, but she must be having such a hard time right now..."

"I'm sure she is. However painful it is, though, only she can pull herself out of it." Eris and Ripple nodded to each other, eyes downcast, as if remembering something.

"By the way, Lady Eris, where are we now?" Rafael asked.

"We're above Ahlemin. If the Prismers' course remains the same, it will pass by here—where it spent so long resting. We've judged that it is likely to make another visit."

"I don't really know how Prismers think, but maybe it took a liking to the place?" Ripple suggested.

"So...the decisive battle takes place when it arrives here," Rafael said.

"Yes," Eris confirmed. "At least, that's what the prince and the ambassador have planned. If it slips by here, the Prismers might reach the capital. We need to deal with it before that. We won't just have the Paladins; the feudal levies are being gathered in Ahlemin as well."

"I think the kids from the knights' academy are coming too," Ripple said. "I saw Miriela dropping in to see Wayne just now."

"Oh, hello, you all! Did you need something?" The door to the cabin cracked open, and Principal Miriela poked her face in.

"Huh? Miriela?" Ripple asked.

"Eavesdropping is rude," Eris commented.

"Oh, sorry! I happened to hear my name right as I got here!" Miriela belatedly knocked on the door as she spoke.

"Ha ha ha... Good to see you, Miriela," Rafael said. When he was a student at the academy, he'd spent much of his time training under her, who at the time had already graduated and was a holy knight cadet. They'd maintained a friendship since then.

"Rafael...I'd heard you were unconscious, recovering from your battle wounds. I'm glad you are all right!"

"Yes, Lady Eris and Lady Ripple took good care of me."

"Excellent. Eris, Ripple, how are your injuries?"

"Fine, fine, I'm almost healed!" Ripple responded.

"Yes, mine as well," Eris agreed.

"Miriela, I'm sorry that the students at the academy have had to be mobilized," Rafael apologized. "It's all due to my lack of nerve..."

"What are you saying?" Miriela protested. "Of course you didn't—Anyway. I've heard the enemy is wielding a hial menace as a

weapon against other humans. I'm glad you're still safe, having faced that. What comes next hasn't been decided yet."

"Yes... By the way, are Rani and Chris coming along as well?"

"No, they're on a special mission to Alcard in the north, and are still there."

Eris and Ripple had spoken to Prince Wayne and Ambassador Theodore about summoning Inglis and Rafinha while Rafael slept, but it seemed they had made a serious miscalculation. Had the girls still been in the capital, they would have been here already—but having been sent as special envoys to Alcard, they might not arrive before the Prismer did. If the Prismer beat them to Ahlemin, Eris and Ripple would have to do their utmost to hold it off as long as possible.

"I see... I'd like to finish this before they're dragged into it..." He was worried not only about the direct threat of Inglis and Rafinha being drawn into the fight with the Prismer, but also the chance that they might arrive after his victory but witness his passing. If possible, he wanted to shield them from both. Though they might not agree or understand...

"N-No, Rafael! You mustn't get impatient! Even if we can't defeat the Prismer, we might still change its course and chase it away! We'll do our best to make that happen!" Miriela insisted.

"Yes. Thank you."

"But if it does come to that, if there is no choice...we can do nothing but rely on you. I'm sorry, Rafael. I have a special-class Rune, but I'm pushing this all on you. I'm so sorry!" Miriela bowed her head deeply. Normally, she was calm and easygoing. But now, her voice trembled, and she seemed likely to burst into tears.

"No. We each have our place...and I accept mine. You too are important for our future. Build up the strength that will protect this land—I believe Prince Wayne was right when he chose you to train a new generation of knights, armed with new technology from Highland."

"But I've always worried I was just running away and— No, sorry. This is no time for my grumbles. Not with what's weighing on you."

"I'll be fine. Don't worry about me. When the time comes, I'll do what I must. No matter what." Rafael smiled and nodded to Miriela.



“Rafael, you really are an amazing person. Looking at you, I feel like I’m a little kid... I’m ashamed of myself.”

A holy knight was the country’s—humanity’s—last hope. A hero, shining in glory for all to see—though not as glorious as proclaimed, due to the consequences of wielding a hial menace kept secret from the public.

Even as a holy knight faced magicite beasts, they must also steel their will, hone their beliefs, to face the reaper which stalked them. Their reality was far starker than it appeared to outsiders. Yet, thrust into this, Rafael still maintained the bearing of that hero. It shocked Miriela—yet, at the same time, left her with a deep respect for him.

“R-Really? Sorry...”

“No, you don’t need to apologize.”

“It’s okay, Miriela,” Eris interjected. “It isn’t just you. Sometimes we catch ourselves feeling the same way.”

“Yeah, we’re impressed by him too. His parents brought him up well.” Ripple nodded.

Rafael laughed. “Well, Rani got the same upbringing.”

“I think she’s a very nice girl,” Miriela said. “Sometimes a bit moody, but with a good heart.”

“Mm... You’re right,” Ripple agreed. “A strong sense of justice, yet kind.”

“She has a strong moral compass,” Eris said. “She reminds me of you.”

“Though I guess she does kind of pick up a reputation for being a *bit much* from hanging out with Inglis so much,” Miriela added. “She definitely eats a bit much.”

“Maybe it’s more that Inglis is manageable because Rafinha keeps an eye on her,” Ripple suggested.

“Yes, I agree. I don’t understand that girl... Not her power, not how she thinks, not anything about her,” Eris said.

“She looks like the daintiest, *moost* precious little thing, but deep inside there’s a demon trying to get out,” Miriela agreed.

“I wonder how she turned out that way...” Eris pondered.

But it was precisely that inexplicable power, that fearless fighting spirit, that they needed right now. There was no way to defeat a Prismar other than for a holy knight to wield a hial menace, and after that battle, the knight’s life would be drained away no matter what. Eris wanted to break that cycle, that recurring tragedy. If she did, Rafael’s fate would change. He was too young to die.

Rafael couldn’t help but laugh wryly. “Ha ha ha, Chris’s parents aren’t that different from mine.”

“Anyway, I should be off now. The students I brought with me are

waiting.” Miriela bid adieu to Rafael and the others and stepped out into the ship’s hold. There, the academy’s best students awaited her return. At their head was a senior with a special-class Rune, a cadet holy knight—Silva.

“Principal! How is Sir Rafael doing?”

“He’d just come to as I arrived. Don’t worry, he’s doing fine.”

“I see. I wish I could have greeted him as well.” To Silva, Rafael was a respected role model—a man who embodied everything he hoped to be as a holy knight.

In the past, Miriela had invited Rafael to the knights’ academy for special training, and Silva’s face had lit up as he asked Rafael for a match. Surely, Silva was now looking forward to what he could learn from watching Rafael in action against the Prismers; he did not yet know the truth of the relation between holy knights and hial menaces. Unfortunately, she couldn’t talk about such complicated matters with him in the room, so she’d asked him to wait for her to check on Rafael herself.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want anything to interfere with his recovery. But instead, I’ve brought someone you were missing even more!”

Ripple peeked out from behind Miriela. “Hey there! How’s everyone doing?” Her mood was completely inappropriate for the situation—and Miriela was glad that she’d chosen to ignore that and brighten things up anyway.

“Lady Ripple!” Silva gasped. “Yes, I’ve been able to train hard without any problems, thanks to you and the others defending our country!”

“Well, we’re in this mess because we haven’t managed to protect it... Sorry for dragging you all into this.”

“No, if I can help in any way, I’d be happy to! If there are any worries about Sir Rafael’s condition, I can fight alongside you in his stead! Just ask!”

Miriela was impressed by his determination and thought a day might come when he would fight alongside Ripple—but not today. *At the very least, he needs to know the truth, accept it, and still be determined to fight. Until then, if Rafael falls and a replacement is needed, I’ll fight alongside Eris and Ripple. A teacher does not sacrifice her students. Even if it means ignoring Prince Wayne’s orders, I will not bend on that,* she swore to herself.

“Huh? What’s wrong, Principal Miriela?” Silva asked. “You look pale.”

“Oh, it’s nothing!” Miriela insisted. “I’m fine!”

“Well, I’m gonna try my hardest to make sure you don’t have to fight, so don’t be so hard on yourself. Just cheer us on!” Ripple patted Silva’s shoulder.

“Y-Yes! I’ll try my hardest! Even Yua is taking this seriously, so of course I can too!”

Silva seemed unusually tense at the physical contact from Ripple. His words were true, though. Yua was waiting patiently rather than either complaining or napping; she was sitting by the hangar’s open bay doors, tapping her feet on the hull outside while staring blankly.

“Oh, wow, you’re right! Yua isn’t sleeping or trying to leave! What a good girl!” Ripple faux-gasped. This was an anomaly in itself, but in any case, Ripple approached Yua and called out to her. “Long time no see, Yua! How’ve you been?”

“Lady Dog-Ears? Good afternoon. Your ears and tail look so cute today.”

“Aha ha, thanks—I don’t really pay attention to them. They’re just something I have. Anyway, sorry for dragging you all the way out here, you know? But we need to all work together for this fight.”

“Yes. It’s okay. I’ll do my best.” Yua was expressionless, but she seemed full of motivation for whatever reason.

“Even you, Yua?! Miriela, Silva, did you hear that?!”

“Y-Yes... What’s gotten into you, Yua?” Principal Miriela asked.

“Yua, I’m glad to hear that, but things here will be a bit different from normal,” Silva said.

“I’m feeling good right now. Being here feels nostalgic,” Yua said.

“You’re feeling nostalgic, Yua?” Ripple asked.

“Yes. Maybe it reminds me of my dad?”

““Maybe?””

“I don’t really remember him...”

“It’d be nice if you met him again someday, right?” Ripple said.

“Yes.” Yua nodded nonchalantly and began to tap her feet again as she looked down at the town below. “Hmm-hm-hmmmm... ♪” She really did seem to be feeling good, as a faint hum escaped her impassive lips.





“Hmm-hm-hmmmm... ♪”

The brisk wind caressed their cheeks as they looked out over a magnificent view of a clear blue sky with lush, verdant fields below. Sitting by the hangar’s bay doors, enjoying such a landscape, dragon-meat skewers were especially delicious. The meat was a souvenir for Rafael, but they hadn’t promised he’d get *all* of it. There was still plenty left, so for now they could experience the sights and the meat together.

Rafinha, wearing the Steelblood Front’s women’s uniform, had a smile on her face. “Mmm! A good view goes so well with a good meal!”

“It really does, Rani. I think we’re almost to the capital,” Inglis replied, wearing the same outfit.

“I’d never eaten dragon meat before, but this definitely is delicious.” Reddas had no complaints, having partaken of some with them.

“Well, sure, it’s delicious, but...”

“I’m not sure how she can be so calm when she’s about to go fight a Prismer...”

“Yeah, I’m not sure about this...”

The Steelblood Front fighters seemed a bit anxious. Perhaps they’d lost their nerve with Leon having disembarked to handle other duties. But those duties were equally vital. They could not object.

“By the reports we’ve received, the Prismer is still on its way to Ahlemin—thus, we need to make sure to stay well fed,” Inglis said. “An army marches on its stomach, after all.”

“And so do you, Chris?” Rafinha asked.

“No, that doesn’t apply to me. If I stopped fighting just because I was hungry, I’d be missing out on life.”

“Ha ha ha...well, I think you’re the only exception.”

“So bold as always, Lady Inglis,” Reddas said. “If only you, rather than I, could be captain of the Royal Guard!”

“Looking at her personality, her character, her demeanor, I’m not sure how you could come to that conclusion,” Rafinha remarked.

“Those qualities are exactly why! To crush under her feet those who would trample over us! Seeing such violence done by such a lovely figure is truly a thrill! More than even a hialal menace, she is a goddess!”

Rafinha could manage nothing but a dry, nonplussed laugh. “Ha ha ha, you’re, uh, getting so into this...”

“Is everyone in the Royal Guard like this?” Inglis couldn’t forget

how, before she'd left for Alcard, the Royal Knights had attended the Weismar troupe's play in the capital and cheered, loudly and hoarsely, for her as a group. It had been quite embarrassing.

Nonetheless, she let out a sudden announcement.

"I think I may want to take you up on that offer though."

Chapter IV: Inglis, Age 15—Squire and Captain (1)

“Your Majesty! Your Majesty!” A rough male voice echoed through the stately, serene audience chamber of the royal palace in Karelia’s capital, Chiral.

“Ah, Reddas. As lively as ever.” King Carlias sighed from his throne. “So you have returned. Excellent work. Were you successful? Had I not ordered you to find Inglis and send word that she should proceed to the Prismers’ location? I do not see her here.”

“Yes, Your Highness! Lady Inglis was pleased to accept your orders! She asked me to send thanks that you would pit her against a strong foe!”

The king laughed. “To think she’d be so pleased to face the scourge of all the surface! Such a valiant, daring girl! Then, has she proceeded directly to Ahlemin?”

If time was of the essence, that was the proper choice. King Carlias would have liked to meet with her and see her reaction, but he could not protest. As king, the fate of his country swung in the balance now that the Prismers had awakened, and although an unusual amount of worry and impatience weighed on him that Inglis’s presence would likely alleviate, he had no choice but to command the greater war effort from the palace.

“No, Lady Inglis will be arriving here shortly. She sent me ahead to inform you and make preparations.”

“Hm? Preparations for what?”

“The ceremony to name the new captain of the Royal Guard. Lady Inglis will accept command, which she previously declined, before taking part in the decisive battle! However, she insists that she merely be the acting commanding officer, and that she be allowed to continue as a student at the knights’ academy.”

“I see. That’s well enough. If we truly can employ her in an emergency like this...”

In that case, their arrangement went beyond a spoken promise to cooperate when a powerful foe appeared; it represented the acceptance of royal authority. It was a step forward. A salary and the like would be necessary, but that was no object. It was a small price to pay to put so much power at his disposal.

“Then, Your Majesty, you give your approval?”

“Of course. It was our request to begin with. Inglis will be arriving soon, I expect? Given the circumstances, it will be a simple one, but prepare for the ceremony all the same!”

According to reports on the Prismer’s movement, it would reach the outskirts of Ahlemin in a few days. They would need to prepare for the upcoming battle there once Inglis arrived, but a day or so spent in the capital should present no problem.

“Yes, Your Highness!” King Carlias’s retainers hurriedly sprang into action.

As the king watched them scatter from the corner of his eye, he asked Reddas, “Just how did Inglis come by her change of heart, though? Did you say something in particular to her?”

“Lady Inglis said that, if she is to fight the Prismer in place of the Paladins, the holy knight himself, and the hial menaces, she should have a fitting rank in order to gain the loyalty of our forces. That would ensure the smooth success of our mission...as well as the preservation of the Paladins’ reputation.”

“She’s right. She has good senses.” King Carlias realized that Inglis likely intended to keep the forces currently in Ahlemin in reserve while she fought the Prismer alone. However, even if Inglis—a first-year student at the academy with no rank or title—were to appeal to the royal command, it would be inevitable that she’d face pushback, if not have her orders flatly ignored.

The rank of Royal Guard Captain—and thus the role of colonel when they were acting as a war regiment—would make her command much more persuasive to the chivalric order.

That was the role of ranks, so to say.

The weight words carried depended on their speaker. And even were she to defeat the Prismer—the question of what would follow remained. The Paladins, after their failure, would surely resent that a mere student at the knights’ academy had stolen their glory. But if it were credited in name to the Royal Guard and its captain, that pain would be dulled. The Royal Guard was one of two grand orders, its captain every bit the equal of the holy knight who was the captain of the other, the Paladins. Even if their aid was necessary to defeat the Prismer, the Paladins would be less preoccupied with their own shame and more interested in celebrating the heroics of their peers.

That was the effect rank had. And it must have been on Inglis’s mind as she had accepted the offer. The fact that she was considering the aftermath of the war also showed that she showed not the slightest expectation of losing her life in battle. That in itself was quite encouraging.

“So brave, yet with a keen eye for the situation—she’s such an unusual girl,” King Carlias pondered. Her prowess in combat defied

expectations, yet talking to her, he'd been amazed at her clear judgment and thoughtfulness. He could sense the seasoned strategic eye hidden behind her vivacious, pretty appearance. One almost too seasoned for a girl of her age—she truly was exceptional. If she'd had her true due, she may well not have been satisfied submitting to his rule. He could only be thankful at the fortune that she had chosen to lend him her strength for Karelia's sake.

The awakening of a Prismer brought tragedy. Whether or not it was defeated, the holy knight that wielded a hial menace against it would die. That was the inescapable truth of the surface, where the Prism Flow fell. That was the way of the world, which had gone on since long before King Carlias's birth. That was what had happened when the Prismer now approaching Ahlemin had been frozen in ice. A holy knight dead, another scar on the hearts of the hial menaces. It was something he could not forget.

Maybe Inglis could shatter the law of that cycle of sorrow.

Though, in the long run—nothing would change.

Human lives were short, and even if Inglis could change the way of the world, those changes would not survive her. Hial menaces, and holy knights, would still be necessary. To overcome a crisis once, that was something that could be done by the right people—but to find a stable resolution to a recurring crisis, you needed a system, not individuals. By fitting people into that system, the same stable results could be expected each time. The hial menaces and holy knights were just such a system.

But still—just once, an exception would be good. He wanted to see that for himself. Whenever humans overturned the way of the world, King Carlias would laugh heartily.

“Lady Inglis also said, ‘To be human is to self-criticize—that self-critique must then be developed to its fullest.’”

“Hmmm...did something happen in Alcard?”

“Well—”

Before Reddas could answer further, a member of the Royal Guard rushed into the room. “Your Majesty! Sir Reddas! A ship is approaching from overhead!”

“Has Inglis arrived?” King Carlias asked.

“I believe she said that she wanted to avoid making a scene...” Reddas replied.

Inglis was aboard a ship of the Steelblood Front. Landing *that* in the royal palace of all places would no doubt cause problems; Inglis surely knew that. Last Reddas had heard, she'd been planning on having it wait some distance away while she visited the palace.

“I'll go look!” he insisted. He left the audience chamber and looked up. “What?! Whose ship is that?!”

It bore the crest of no country or order. At first glance, he couldn't determine who it belonged to. However, it was definitely not the Steelblood Front battleship that Inglis and Rafinha were aboard—that he was sure of.

“Ready for interception! We don't know who's aboard!” Reddas's voice boomed, and the knights of the Royal Guard tensed. Many of their forces were still deployed to the northern border, and others had been sent as reinforcements to Alcard, so the defenses of both the capital and the palace were—to be blunt—lacking. A foe could be trying to take advantage of their current weakness.

The palace was suddenly abuzz at Reddas's command.

“Yes, sir!”

“Prepare to intercept!”

“Scramble the Flygears! Form a defensive perimeter!”

“Whose ship is that? It doesn't seem to be the one carrying Inglis!” King Carlias said.

“Your Majesty?! It's dangerous to be out here! That is definitely not the ship carrying Lady Inglis!” Reddas answered.

“Then, someone must be making an attempt on my life amidst the chaos caused by the Prismers's awakening and our weakened defenses!”

“But who?! The Steelblood Front's cooperating with us...”

Boom-boom-boom-boom-boom-boom!

The ship unleashed a volley of cannon fire. It rained down upon the palace, crushing roofs and smashing walls.

“Gaaah?!”

“Ahhhhhhhh?!”

The stately, serene atmosphere of the palace had transformed into a battlefield. Knights went down one after another from the sudden attack.

“Stop those cannons! Flygears, close in and disrupt them!” As Reddas barked orders—

Bang!

Part of the enemy ship's outer metal plating suddenly blew off, though not from an attack. It appeared to have been deliberately purged, revealing...

“Wh—?! Venefic's ensign?! Is that a Venefic ship?!”

“How bold to invade this far!”

The false pretense had paid off. Karelia was in a confused state of emergency as it strove to respond to the Prismers. King Carlias had

heard that even the Steelblood Front was cooperating to protect the towns and villages in its path. Amidst all of this, no one had the time to look twice at a battleship of unknown origin flying overhead. Even if someone had suspicions, it could easily be written off as a Steelblood Front ship.

And the fact that they were now openly flying Venefic's war ensign—that meant that they considered themselves assured of their victory. At the same time, it was surely meant to show that Venefic had taken Chiral.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!” A Flygear squadron took off from the Venefic warship. At its lead was a knight with a laugh as booming as Reddas's. “King Carlias of Karelia, Your Majesty! It's an honor to meet you—but now I must bid my farewell! I am Ross Rochefort, a general of Venefic! I will take your head as my trophy from this battle!”

“General Rochefort?! So that's the man who wielded a hialal menace against our forces—so that's a hialal menace as a weapon?!” Reddas gasped.

Rochefort's hand gripped a gigantic golden shield around as tall as he was. They could see its divine radiance.

“It must be...” King Carlias said. “But those are bold words from someone who uses such heavenly blessings for mere burglary! Bolder than your deeds permit!”

Rochefort pointed at his own head. “Strategy, strategy! I don't care what anyone says, this is for the sake of the girl I must protect! No one else amounts to anything! Now die! Die! Die, die, dieeee!” He leveled his shield at King Carlias and prepared to charge.

“Form up! Become a wall to protect His Majesty!” Reddas ordered. “We don't need to take down the enemy! We just need to buy time!”

If they could make the fight stretch on long enough, perhaps Rochefort, wielding a hialal menace, would burn through his power. Reddas had heard that Rochefort had wielded the hialal menace even during his battle with the Paladins on the border. He couldn't last long using even more power here.

“What about you, Reddas?” King Carlias asked. The king seemed to have guessed something about the situation from Reddas's orders.

“I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I heard from Lady Inglis...”

“So she saw even that far ahead... Truly unfathomable. Yes, though! If we buy time, she shall arrive! We must hold out until then!”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Reddas and the surrounded knights nodded in assent. Their ranks knitted tightly as they pulled into a defensive formation.

“Ha ha ha ha ha! That won't help you!” Rochefort leaped from his

Flygear, firing light backward from his shield to propel himself forward through the air, and charged toward the knights standing in his way.

“Aaaagggghhh!” Screams arose as wrecked Flygears fell from the sky.

“Thanks for clumping up like that for me! It makes my job easier!”

“Ugh...! Spread out! Spread out and distract him!” Reddas ordered.

“That won’t save you either!” Rochefort replied, as light shot out from the gems on his shield, cutting down the soldiers around him.

“Aaaah, no!” The screams continued. In the blink of an eye, the number of knights protecting King Carlias had been halved.

“Ha ha ha ha! You fools! You’re throwing away your lives! The very idea that a few lunks like you could stop the true form of a hial menace is foolhardy! Outrageous! The height of insolence!”

“Ugh...! Don’t get cocky!” one knight grunted.

“But his power is overwhelming!” another cried.

“This is what’s supposed to be used against a Prismer! How are we supposed to...”

The knights’ faces betrayed their realization of the danger they were in. Their morale weakening, Rochefort called out to them, his tone suddenly changed.

“Heyyy. Why don’t you stop throwing your lives away? Drop your weapons, stand back, and watch. Karelia will fall, but you all will have your place as knights of Venefic. A new lord needs his new vassals. Just a different boss. Nothing much will change. How about it, hmm? If you realize what’s at stake, drop your weapons and stand back. No one will blame you. Stand back, stand back—” Rochefort waved his hand, as if to shoo the knights away, and gave them a moment to think.

“That’s impossible!”

“Are you kidding me?!”

“Don’t mock us!”

“I’m not mocking you,” Rochefort continued. “It’s because we need you that I don’t want you to throw your lives away. Your local knowledge will be necessary in Venefic’s new lands.”

“Don’t listen to him!” Reddas thundered. “They’ve chosen to attack our palace at a time when the Prismer has revived, instead of protecting their own people! They have no right to stand over ours!”

But King Carlias quieted him. “That’s enough, Reddas! Stand back. All of you, stand back and watch.”

“Your Majesty?! What are you saying?!”

“Do not question your king!”

“Wh—?!” Shocked at his firmness, the knights took several steps

backward.

“He is correct,” King Carlias continued. “At this rate, you’re throwing your lives away—such is the power of the ultimate Artifact.”

He took one step toward Rochefort, then another, his hand reaching toward the dirk at his waist. “And...those who follow his words, even if they do survive, must then be punished, lest they set a poor example. But I have no intent to do so—and thus, I order you to step back.”

If everyone stepped back, loyal and disloyal alike, then those who would follow Rochefort could not be distinguished. In the current situation, that was for the best.

“Y-Your Majesty!”

“If we only need to buy a little time—I will do so myself!” One wielding a hialar menace as a weapon could not endure long. And Inglis would soon arrive. For both of those reasons, they needed to hold on for only a little.

King Carlias drew his dirk. Its softly glowing blade was translucent like an azure gem, its hilt sculpted in mimicry of the legendary dragons—this was Dragon Claw, the paired Artifact of Dragon Fang, which had been entrusted to the holy knight Rafael.

“Ah, an Artifact like the holy knight Rafael’s... So, the special-class Rune on your hand is no mere decoration, then?” Rochefort asked.

“I, Carlias, may not have a blade that can stand against the heavens, but I have claws with which to defend myself! You will not take my head so easily!”

“Ohhh, do you, now? You’ve got spirit—let’s see if you have the strength to back it up!” Rochefort raised his shield before himself and charged straight toward King Carlias. It was a simple, straightforward attack, but it was blindingly fast.

“Haaaaah!” King Carlias shouted, and his body began to glow. Immediately, Rochefort’s aerial charge struck down where the king was standing.

Ker-thuuud!

The impact blasted around him, blowing away pieces of the ground, and a massive cloud of dust obscured the view of the onlookers.

“So powerful!”

“Taking that head-on...”

“Your Majesty! Your Majesty?!”

As the knights shouted in dismay, Rochefort smirked. “Oh my. Shattered by a single blow? What a pity.”

An azure flash rained down upon him. “Eyes on the fight!”

Rochefort grunted in surprise.

Claaang!

Rochefort swiftly reacted to the attack from above him and repositioned his shield overhead to take Carlias's strike. King Carlias, clad in a winged suit of azure armor, had flown up into the sky, then slashed down at him using the dust as cover.

"Well, now. The same Artifact awakening as that holy knight, Rafael—it seems you're different from the royals in my country, who are content to bark orders as they hide behind their throne."

"No, I'm no different. Even now, I send a young man with a promising future to fight the Prismer while I remain here in the safety of the capital. My Rune cries out to me—because of me, it cannot shine, cannot fulfill its duty!"

Special-class Rune or no, Carlias was king. He could not abandon that duty in order to wield a hial menace and fall in battle. So had it been for the battle where the Prismer once kept in Ahlemin had been encased in ice. To fulfill the duty he held as king, he could not take up the duty to wield a hial menace and fall in battle. He had had no choice but to leave it to those dear to him he wanted to protect, those with futures that should have been longer than his own.

"Then rejoice! For today its cries will cease! Since its bearer will be dead!" Rochefort fiercely kicked off the ground and flew forth.

The sudden momentum threatened to blow the king away. Smashing into the palace walls or the ground would be painful. He grunted in surprise and twisted away from Rochefort's onslaught, leaping up with the power of his azure wings.

"Too slow!" Rochefort sneered, firing beams of light from his shield into the king's path. Several of the beams grazed him as he shot upward.

"Ugh...?!" Carlias banked sharply to his left. However, another beam immediately sprang into that path as well. "Then—!" *Then...I shall do a complex maneuver at high speed, inserting precise directional changes.* He began to fly at a speed that the average person's eyes couldn't keep up with.

"More, more, more!" Rochefort taunted. Even still, the light of his shield precisely followed the king. Little by little, the azure armor provided by Dragon Claw was taking hits and being whittled away.

"Ugh...! Even with Dragon Claw, I cannot escape... He's too strong!"

"Try as you might, you're just an old man who's been away from the front lines for too long! The holy knight Rafael did far better with a similar Artifact! You're so excited to be in a real battle after so many

years that you've made mistake after mistake since you first came at me! You should've used the cloud of dust to flee! That's what your knight Rafael did! That would be the proper choice, understanding your own power versus mine!"

"Just an old man... Well, that much may be true!" King Carlias's flesh was weaker than it had been in his prime, and his combat senses had dulled as well. That was true enough, but where did Rochefort's high spirits come from? In the battle with the Paladins at the border, and here again, he had wielded a hial menace's strength with abandon, yet he showed no signs of weakening. His life should have been burned away by now.

"Hurry up! If you don't hurry up and flee, you'll take a direct hit!" Rochefort taunted.

"Curses! If this keeps up..." If Carlias fell here, then even if Rochefort was defeated, even if the Prismers were defeated...

"Grahhhh! Your Majesty!" One of his knights suddenly let out a battle cry and rushed toward Rochefort, his full weight behind his sword—it was Reddas.

Crrraaccck!

But as the sword fell on Rochefort's back, it rang as if striking a sturdy wall and shattered.

"Were you trying something?" Rochefort turned and smirked.

"Ah...! Then..." Casting away his broken sword, Reddas tried to grapple with Rochefort. It was the act of a man sacrificing himself to buy even a little time.

"Ugh, I'm not the type to welcome another man's embrace." The back of Rochefort's hand flashed forth, striking Reddas in the face and sending him flying. Yet Reddas quickly rose to his feet, blood streaming from his broken nose, and again approached Rochefort, looking to grapple.

"Reddas!" King Carlias yelled. "Halt! Stay back!"

"No! I can't stay silent and use Your Majesty as a shield!" Reddas roared.

"That's right! Why are we just quietly watching?"

"Follow him! Follow Captain Reddas!"

"Just buy some time! Lady Inglis will be here soon!" Dozens of knights poured forth behind Reddas, swarming over Rochefort.

"How dismal!" Rochefort swung his shield in a broad arc, sweeping away the knights. They were knocked down into a crouch and slammed against the palace wall. "Very well," Rochefort said. "If you're going to interfere, I'll begin with you!" The gems on his shield glowed, ready to fire more beams. He leveled it at Reddas and the

other knights pressed against the wall.

“Stay right where you are!” Carlias rushed toward Rochefort with his blade at the ready, trying to stop him.

But Rochefort saw it coming. The blade caught only air, and he slipped behind the king. “Disappointing! I thought I’d taught you a lesson—that fleeing when you had the chance was the better strategy!”

Whack!

His golden shield smashed into King Carlias, sending him plunging like an arrow toward the palace wall. Unable to regain control midair, he smashed into the wall.

“Your Majesty—?!”

“Ugh... They say there’s many a good tune played on an old fiddle...but perhaps I’m just *too* old...” Blood dripped from King Carlias’s brow as he sprawled on the floor. The trembling and pain rushing through his body meant he wouldn’t rise again soon.

“A beautiful display of fealty—but now it means your doom! Even a dragon’s fang or claw is meaningless in the face of a hial menace! Powerless, powerless, powerless! Now, you can all be together when you go!”

King Carlias, still lying on his back, suddenly began to laugh.

“Huh? What’s so funny?” A gigantic shadow swept over Rochefort’s head.

“But how about a dragon *tail*?”

“Wh—?!” Rochefort’s eyes snapped up to an incomprehensible sight—swinging down at him was a strange tail dozens of times longer than he was tall. The person behind the attack was a girl with silver hair, and he could see a dark-haired girl clinging to her back and screaming.

Rochefort’s shout of astonishment and the dark-haired girl’s panicked shriek overlapped.

“Whaaaaaat?!”

“Eeeeeeeek!”

Slammmmmmm!

An ear-piercing noise filled the air, and the palace shook as though there were an earthquake. Inglis had descended from the Steelblood Front ship, swinging Fufailbane’s tail with all her might. Rochefort was nowhere to be seen afterward.



Inglis smiled as she bowed to the crowd. "Sorry to keep you waiting. How are you this fine day?" Then she turned to the side. "Rani, are you okay?"

"I am very *not* okay! That was terrifying! I can't believe you'd jump from that high!" Rafinha jabbed a finger toward the Steelblood Front ship floating high above.

"Well, I mean, time was of the essence. And it was a good time to unload the cargo anyway, right?"

King Carlias laughed. "As incredible as ever—every time I see you, you manage to astonish me in some new way!"

"Your Majesty...are you all right?" Inglis asked. "That's a wonderful Artifact. I wonder if at some point you'd like to—"

"Ugh, Chris! Save it for later!" Rafinha interrupted. "His Majesty is hurt!"

"As if I could stand up to...you..." King Carlias rasped, his injuries becoming more evident.

Reddas gasped. "Oh no! His Majesty's wounds are grave! Rafinha, heal him with haste!" he pleaded.

"Yes, I'll do my best! But unlike last time with his arm, now he's in mortal danger!" The king's whole body, especially his head, was battered, bruised, and bleeding. Rafinha wasn't confident that her powers were enough to save him.

"Don't worry, Rani. You've got this. But listen to me for a second, okay?" Then Inglis whispered something in Rafinha's ear.

"Hm...? O-Oh...okay, I get it!" Then Rafinha faced King Carlias and summoned forth her healing powers.

I can leave that to her, Inglis thought, turning her eyes toward the dragon's tail.

"L-Lady Inglis...do you think that finished him off?" Reddas asked.

Inglis quietly shook her head at Reddas. "Of course not. Why would it have? I would never do something like that to someone it could defeat. Taking them out with an ambush would be such a waste."

A good fight that ended in one sneak attack would deny her the chance to experience her foe's full power. Inglis Eucus fought by taking on her opponents at their strongest. That, after all, was the best for her own development.

No matter what, she wouldn't change that—*couldn't* change that. "I just wanted to drop off my luggage and say hello as I was passing through. I'm sure he's fine."

"Of course I am!" The dragon's tail dragged against the ground as Rochefort pushed it aside, appearing from underneath it. He was covered in dirt, but he didn't appear to be seriously injured.

“See? Fit as a fiddle!” Inglis announced.

“Huh?” Rochefort asked. “I’m not sure you should be happy about that...”

“Well, I’m overjoyed! If I can’t take down a holy knight wielding a hial menace, I won’t be able to take down a Prism—er—you’ll be perfect to prove this sword upon.” Inglis chuckled and looked down at her sword made from Fufailbane’s scales. It was a mighty sword as long as she was tall. Smiling, she ran her finger down its blade. Some time had passed since she’d made it, and now she finally had the chance to test her work. Of course she was happy!

Rochefort laughed as well. “To see a wielded hial menace and smile—you are either a fool or mad... Who *are* you, my dear?”

“Sorry for not introducing myself. I’m Inglis Eucus, and soon I’ll be taking emergency acting command of the Royal Guard—but for now, I’m an aspiring squire studying at the knights’ academy.” Inglis bowed politely to Rochefort.

“A squire?!”

“Yes, as you can see.” Inglis brandished the back of her right hand, clearly lacking a Rune.

“You’re Runeless? No, that matters not. Your dainty appearance aside, the blow you struck from above with such a huge piece of meat is unquestionable. I was honestly shocked. I am Ross Rochefort, a knight entrusted by my homeland Venefic with a hial menace. Pleased to make your acquaintance.” Rochefort’s bow was just as polite as Inglis’s.

“Thank you for your courtesy—and thank you, especially, for giving me the unexpected opportunity to fight a transformed hial menace here.”

“Hmm? This is the first time I’ve been thanked for that. It was your own countrymen who protested at the use of a hial menace in a battle between humans, was it not? King Carlias here, the holy knight, your own hial menaces—but the ‘emergency acting commander of the Royal Guard,’ as you put it, has no objection then?” He even took care to use her exceptionally unwieldy title.

Inglis found him intriguing. “It’s a part-time job, one that requires I subdue the powerful enemies who threaten Karelia. It’s only natural that I thank those who keep me employed. If you had fought the reborn Prism—er and fulfilled your duty, I’d have had no one to fight at all. But thanks to your choices, I get the chance to fight both you and the Prism—er. A blade—even one that protects humanity—has nothing left if it has no job.”

“‘A blade which protects humanity,’ huh? Your noble words don’t match the glimmer in your eyes or the fierce smile on your face. It seems to me more like you just want to fight for your own

enjoyment.”

Inglis laughed. “I can’t argue with that.”

Rafinha sighed as she continued to heal King Carlias. “Chris, it’s nice that you’re so honest, but I wish you’d try to argue... This hurts to watch...”

“Ahem,” Inglis began again. “For the greater good, I will defeat you! Knight of the evil neighboring country, taste the blade of justice!” Inglis furrowed her eyebrows as she attempted to play along with Rafinha’s comment.

“Wow... That was incredibly obviously an act...” Rafinha sighed quietly. The words were right, but they sounded so *wrong* coming from Inglis. Rafinha felt a creepy chill run up her spine.

“However, I’d like to fight you over and over,” Inglis continued, “so I’d appreciate it if you could run away at the right time and then attack me again later!”

“There’s the Chris I know,” Rafinha grumbled. “Not that *that* would be any better... Ugh, whatever, just do your thing! We need to get to Rafael!”

“Understood, Rani!” Inglis faced Rochefort again with a ladylike smile. “So, since neither you nor I have much time, I’d like to proceed to our battle.”

The Steelblood Front had kept Inglis informed on the Prismers as they traveled, and currently it was only a few days away from Ahlemin. Counting the time to reach Ahlemin and the preparations necessary once she arrived, she had only around a single day to spend in Chiral. Not much time at all. Normally, she’d want to dedicate several days, and several sessions, to such a powerful foe, but if that was impossible, she’d like to enjoy the short battle intensely.

Rochefort grinned at the contrast between her words and her demeanor. “I don’t know what your deal is, but it seems you’re another outlaw like me who’s strayed from the path of chivalry. Perhaps the gods will smile that we crush each other here!”

“No, I don’t think I’ve strayed from that path. After all, you can’t depart from something you were never on to begin with. And the goddess would never say such things. She wanted me to live as I please—she is quite generous.”

“Ha ha ha! So perhaps you’ve strayed further than even I have!”

“In that case, you must recognize that you have stepped away from the path that holy knights entrusted with hial menaces must walk, and yet...you use the few moments you have left to struggle toward some goal. You seem to be an unexpectedly good person.”

“Perhaps I’ll capture the villain before me! I’ll put a stop to your degradation—after all, you disgust me!” Rochefort laughed haughtily. “I will punish you! With all my might! Don’t complain if I mess up

that pretty face such that you'll never be able to seduce a man!"

"Yes, go right ahead! I've never planned on doing such a thing, so don't hold back! Oh, but I do enjoy looking at myself in the mirror, so I'd appreciate it if you avoided scarring my face in particular."

"If you insist!"

Skreech!

A sublime, sparkling light shot out from one of the gems decorating Rochefort's shield.

"Ooh?!" Inglis exclaimed in surprised admiration. *This light isn't magic alone!*

Rochefort's hial menace was sublimating his mana into something completely different. Specifically, the inherent inefficiency of mana seemed to have been almost completely eliminated by the intervention of the hial menace.

Mana was a far less efficient source of power than aether. It formed the basis of magic, but essentially, when a person expended mana, twenty or thirty percent would go into the actual effect of the magic, and the rest would merely dissipate. Evel's Mana Refine technique could bring that up to maybe fifty or sixty percent actual effectiveness, but what Inglis was witnessing here far surpassed that.

In Rochefort's case here, not a bit was wasted—no, it actually went further than that. The wasted seventy or eighty percent was converted by the hial menace into something else, something that took the same output but gave it a kick. It even rivaled the power of aether. However, if one were to ask whether it was aether, the answer was no. Aether was the divine essence that underlay all things. Inglis primarily used it for combat, but it was by no means limited to this; it was truly universal.

Meanwhile, Rochefort's power can only be used for war, and only through the intervention of a hial menace, Inglis thought. It lacks the universality of actual aether. It's similar to aether yet at the same time unlike it—maybe I can call it "dusty aether." In any case...

"Wow...that's fascinating!" Even as Inglis determined the nature of Rochefort's power, her body sprang into action. "Haaaah!" She swung her dragonscale sword into the path of the light.

Clooonk!

The sword deflected the light, succeeding in changing its trajectory, but the force of that intense light broke Inglis's stance, causing her to stumble backward. "Ah...!" Her arms had gone numb.

The light, missing the mark, slammed into the ramparts. Their

collapse left only wreckage in the light's wake.

Crrraaassshhh!

“Such wonderful power!” Inglis praised. Truly what could be expected from the ultimate Artifact. It left nothing to be desired.

“Oh, drop the act!”

Skreech! Skreech!

Rochefort fired two more blasts at her torso.

In her present state, it would be hard for her to intercept them as she had before. Even when she had been prepared, she'd felt the knockback and nearly lost hold of her sword. She'd have to take a different approach.

“Haaaah!” Inglis used the momentum of her backward stumble to flip backward, kicking the incoming blasts of light skyward.

Smack! Bam!

Their trajectory changed abruptly, soaring up into the sky.

“What?! The sword didn't work, but your feet—?!”

In truth, it wasn't that complex of an explanation. Inglis had taken Rochefort's first attack having only released the enhanced-gravity magic she typically kept on herself as a training aid. Since it had forced her sword back, she'd activated Aether Shell and kicked the shield's blasts of light away. She had wanted to keep going longer before resorting to Aether Shell, but the destruction wrought by the shot she'd failed to fully deflect showed that too much persistence might result in the loss of the entire palace. Worse yet, if things went poorly, Rafinha could be in danger. Inglis had to reluctantly give up and give it her all.

However, the follow-up shots she'd repelled with a kick had also gone not entirely where she'd expected, and her legs were still a little numb. A challenge, then—there was still enjoyment to be had in this fight.

“Next, I'd like to try deflecting with my sword again, if you will.” Inglis brandished her dragonscale sword. The point where the previous blast of light had impacted it full-on showed not even a scratch. The light was not merely mana—it was dusty aether, on a scale comparable with actual aether. That technique was somewhat like Aether Pierce or Aether Strike. *The sword took that hit without a scratch on it, though—it might even hold up to the full power of Aether Shell!*

“As you wish! I’ll even make this one extra special! No need to thank me!” Rochefort leveled his shield, adorned with six gems. This time, all six gleamed and produced rays of light. If each gem could be considered one cannon, this was a full barrage. Six rays sprang for Inglis, changing their trajectories slightly to separately target her head and torso, both shoulders, and both arms.

“No, no, I simply must give you my thanks!” Six shots of such intensity—powerful enough that they couldn’t be blocked, impressive enough that they would be a waste to dodge. She’d have to face them head-on!

“Haaaah!” Inglis stepped into the incoming fire, swinging her sword up from her right hip to her left shoulder.

Clang! Clong! Claaang!

The shots aimed at her right leg, torso, and left shoulder were deflected into the sky. But the other three were already upon her. Repositioning such a large sword in time to slash at them again, even with Aether Shell active, was impossible.

“Useless!” Rochefort grinned, unaware of what was to come.

“Are...!” Inglis used the remaining momentum from her slash to somersault backward. The speed and distance of her leap opened up only a little room between her and the remaining shots, but that was enough time for another swing of her sword.

“You...!”

Clang! Clong!

This time, a mirrored slash handled the shots aimed at her left leg and right shoulder. Using the momentum, she backflipped again. When she landed, she thrust her sword straight at the shot aimed at her head.

“Sure?!”

Claaaaaang!

The last shot bounced off into the sky with the loudest noise yet.

“Hmmm, wonderful! It’s like you’re dancing with that sword of yours! How absolutely lovely—”

Booooooom!

A large explosion suddenly rang out behind Rochefort. “What?! What’s going on?!” As he spun around, he saw the engines of the ship

the Venefic forces were using as a carrier ablaze. The blasts Inglis had deflected had struck true on its engine room. Having lost control, it crash-landed in the large canal leading to Lake Bolt. From the looks of it, though, it wouldn't explode—at least he hoped so.

"Ohhh! You aimed for there?!" Reddas shouted, incredulous.

"A-Amazing! I didn't need it proved to me again, but she's definitely special!"

"W-Well done, Lady Inglis! Your movements were so fast I couldn't even see them, but their strength! Their beauty! Just seeing it makes me shiver!"

The knights around him nodded in agreement.

Rafinha laughed. "The Royal Guard likes you, Chris." She was busy healing King Carlias, but the excited cries were overwhelming enough to momentarily break her focus.

Inglis wanted to object, to point out that if the knight *hadn't* been able to see her, how could he determine the beauty of her movement?

But now was not the time. Clearing her throat, she smiled and called out to Rochefort. "Wow, those were really strong! So strong they sank a ship!"

"You bounced them back into the engines?!"

"Honestly, I wanted to only strike a glancing blow so I could capture it. My aim was a little off. Hmm, that's gonna be tough to repair, isn't it? I need to keep practicing."

The blasts of light from his shield had been so powerful that she hadn't had full control of them. Those last ones had remained as powerful as those she'd kicked away; she was fortunate in that she had managed to aim them somewhat.

Inglis laughed to herself. "Looks like I'm the one letting my weapon down," she chuckled, smiling and stroking the sword. It was the kind of thing she hadn't said even once since starting her new life as Inglis Eucus. But just once, she'd wanted to.

Every weapon she'd taken to hand up until now had, when she fought fully shrouded with Aether Shell, been unable to handle the strain and shattered, but the sword forged from the dragon Fufailbane's scales showed no sign of doing so. It complied with her strength. As she'd just said, if she herself were stronger, she would have been able to perfectly redirect the shield's fire.

This was important. It meant a huge leap in her overall strength in combat. After all, up until now she'd been fighting barehanded, but now she had a weapon.

"I don't know what you're so happy about—our line of retreat is now cut off!" Rochefort snarled.

"I suppose you hadn't planned on such an eventuality?" Inglis retorted.

“Of course not! You’d need to have a screw loose somewhere to think of a plan like that!”

“I think it’s a shame that someone as strong as you is so convinced you need to live fast and die young—but I suppose you’re stuck in your ways, correct?”

“Wh—?! Just what are you? A new type of hialal menace from Highland?! The Steelblood Front or whatever’s secret weapon?!”

“Neither. Just an aspiring squire—soon to be emergency acting commander of the Royal Guard.”

Rochefort laughed. “Not a very nice person, making fun of a man whose back is against the wall! But cruelty from a beautiful woman has its own appeal.”

“You seem to have some very specific tastes.”

“In any case, I will not die for nothing! I will claw my mark onto this world!”

“Yes, I’m hoping so.”

“Ha ha ha! You’re a poisoned apple, indeed!” The gems on Rochefort’s shield gleamed, even brighter than when they had fired before—the glow covered the entire shield, then all of Rochefort himself.

Skreeeeeeeeech!

The high-pitched ringing sounded almost like a scream of ecstasy from Rochefort’s entire body. At the same time, the ground began to shake where he stood, then collapse into a pit under intense pressure.

Meaning, his attacks before were just a distraction. Just how strong of an attack will he bring out? Inglis found herself wondering with bated breath. And how well will this dragonscale sword stand up to it? An unknown enemy and a new weapon—there won’t be many battles that make my heart dance like this!

“I’m going to make you cryyy! I swear it!” he bellowed.

“Yes, I’m looking forward to it! Please do!” Inglis smiled with a twinkle in her eye as she raised her sword and responded to Rochefort.

“Here I cooome!”

Smaaash!

A simple stomp of his foot produced an explosive rumble and pillar of dust. Looking back on her own experience, Inglis recalled something similar when she’d used her aether techniques at full power. *Meaning...he’s all the opponent I could ask for. His ferocious momentum is gouging a rut in the ground as he rushes toward me—it’s a*

head-on attack!

“Then, you’d do best to prepare as well! Haaaaah!”

Smaaash!

Inglis also stomped her foot and charged toward Rochefort.

“Huh?! They disappeared?!”

“I-I can’t see! I can’t see anything!”

“Be careful, everyone! Keep your feet planted firm! Something big’s coming!” Rafinha called out to the knights.

Skreeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeech!

Without missing a beat, an ear-shattering noise rang out. Suddenly, the onlookers could see Inglis slamming a sword as big as she was into Rochefort’s shield. At the same time, the shock wave from the impact hit them.

“Whoa!” The knights were knocked onto their backs, just as Rafinha had warned.

“Don’t stand up! It’s better to keep low!” she instructed as she covered King Carlias, who she was still healing. She couldn’t let him be knocked away from her.

“Got it!”

“I will! Thanks!”

“Rafinha! How is His Majesty’s condition?!” Reddas asked as he helped support the king.

“He’ll be okay! I did what Chris said, and it worked wonders! He’ll definitely be fine! We just have to wait for her to kick that guy’s butt!”

Inglis had to win—she already had her schedule booked. Saving Rafael and taking down the Prismers was the real fight, and that still awaited her. It wouldn’t be like Inglis to miss a fight, nor to miss the chance to obliterate anything that might make Rafinha sad.

That was why Inglis wouldn’t lose. She *couldn’t* lose. If she couldn’t overcome a holy knight and a hial menace, then it would also be impossible to defeat a Prismers. She would win. She would win, smile, and say something like, *Now that was a good fight*, not realizing how worried people were about her.

That smile, that charm, would secure Rafinha’s forgiveness no matter what happened. It had always been that way. Rafinha couldn’t imagine that ever changing.

The shock of Inglis’s clash with Rochefort pushed them both back farther away from each other. They stomped deeper into the ruts they’d left as they came to a stop simultaneously.

“I see...! We’re evenly matched!” Rochefort snarled.

“Perfect! Then—”
Then, once again!

Sma—smash!

The sound of two stomps overlapped.

Skreeeeeeeeeeeeeeeech!

Once again, the impact bounced them both apart.

“That shock must be hard on those slender arms of yours,” Rochefort taunted. “It’s okay. You can avoid it! With your agility, you should be able to slide right by!”

“No, I’m going to meet you head-on!” Inglis Eucus fought by overcoming her opponents when they were at their best. Plus, there was the matter of testing the strength of her sword. She wanted to keep banging and banging on that supreme shield that a hial menace had transformed into.

Skreeeeeeeeeeeeeeeech!

“Don’t be stubborn, now!” Rochefort yelled.

“You neither!” Inglis snapped back.

Skreeeeeeeeeeeeeeeech!

“Bwa ha ha ha ha ha!”

“Heh heh heh heh!”

Over and over, Inglis and Rochefort collided head-on. The shock of each impact shook the entire palace, making it creak. It was starting to crumble and fall in places.

The knights were in a frenzy. “I-If this keeps going, the whole palace is going to collapse!”

“I can’t tell who’s going to win, or even when they’re going to stop!” an incredulous knight said.

“I can’t even *see* them move!” another shouted.

“No, wait! Chris is pushing him back little by little!”

To be honest, even Rafinha couldn’t completely grasp their movements. Inglis and Rochefort flickered in and out of her vision over and over, disappearing before reappearing with a monumental crash. Each time they collided, it was at the same spot, hence the circle of devastation it left. Slowly but surely, that circle was extending into an oval, pushing farther and farther back on Rochefort’s side—meaning Inglis was pressing forward.

Skreeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeech!

“Guhhhh?!” Rochefort was beginning to lose his balance; his knee touched the ground for a brief moment. “Why?! Why is she pushing me back?! Where does that slender form hide such strength?!”

Inglis quietly shook her head. “No, you misunderstand.”

“What?!”

“I’m not pushing you back. You’re simply being pushed back. Haven’t you realized?” Inglis gently gestured toward her mouth, an extremely disappointed, pitiful look on her face. It was rare to see her show such melancholy in combat.

“Ah?” Rochefort wiped his mouth—and his hand came back dripping with sticky red blood. Inglis’s strikes weren’t responsible for that. Their clashes were still sword on shield. The real fight was just beginning, but there was only so much time left.

“Ngh!” Rochefort grunted and waved his hand in disgust, scattering the blood.

“Th-This...! He’s...?!” Reddas began.

“W-Wait! Will this happen to my brother too?!” Rafinha gasped.

Their meanings weren’t clear, but Inglis could tell what they were thinking—that this was the side effect of using a hial menace, that Rafael would end up like this were he to wield Eris or Ripple. That must have been what they were thinking.

“No. It’s not like that, Rani. He was like this to begin with.”

“Huh?! So he’s always been like...”

“Yeah. He’s...not well. I’m amazed he’s still alive.” Just standing must have been taking a toll on him. Fighting this fiercely must have left him in incredible pain.

His physical, and especially mental, fortitude kept him going when the average person would already be in a coffin.

He may as well have been dead, and yet that was exactly why the hial menace’s sapping away of his life was ineffective. A walking corpse had none to give. Whereas the Steelblood Front’s masked leader used aether to block the hial menace’s effects, Rochefort simply wasn’t affected by the hial menace, even through an extended fight.

Inglis hadn’t known such a thing was possible. It was a miraculous coincidence. Rochefort, stricken by a fatal disease and with little time left to live, had taken a hial menace in hand and stood forth on the battlefield. Inglis didn’t know what his beliefs or goals were, but this was the first battle she’d ever fought in such circumstances. It was rare. It was valuable...but she still had this to say: “I admire your perseverance. But I believe you’ve reached your limits. I suggest that

you take a break now.”

Rocheftort cackled. “Cruelest of all is that you see my state and still offer such words! The reaper will not wait for me! To stand still is to accept a meaningless death! That will not save Arles! Do not hold back! The battle con— *Groork!*” Rocheftort coughed up an alarming amount of blood and slumped to his knees. He clutched the shield that was a hial menace and barely managed to keep himself from collapsing. He truly was at his limits.

Inglis quickly walked toward him. “Of course, I understand your condition. That’s why I’m suggesting we pick this back up after a break.”

Rocheftort, wordless, looked at her quizzically.

“Rani! Could you bring me some of that?” Inglis asked, motioning in the direction of the dragon meat.

“S-Sure! Got it!” Rafinha brought forth a skewer. It looked positively delicious.

“This is the meat of an ancient dragon. The strong life force it contains will cure whatever ails you. See, look.” Inglis looked forward to King Carlias, who was sitting against a palace wall, being looked after by Reddas and the knights. His wounds had brought him close to death, but he had recovered enough to regain consciousness.

The meat of an ancient dragon wasn’t just tasty; it also had medicinal effects. Some said that the better the medicine, the more bitter it was. That didn’t apply to dragon meat, though. It was also said that dragons weren’t of this world, and ancient dragons were near their peak. This world’s common sense didn’t apply to such uncommon beings.

“Ah...!” Rocheftort gasped. “So...I failed to take his head?”

“We don’t know that for sure yet. Now, go ahead. Have some.”

“Taking pity on me, are you? Even if you ask in return that I stop fighting and surrender—” Rocheftort had absolutely no intent to do so. He truly didn’t, but not everyone felt that way.

Whoosh!

His golden shield shone a bright white, and shifted to a human shape. A demihuman like Ripple, with the ears and tail of an animal. Her apparent age was around twenty, just like Ripple, but the impression she gave was quite different—mature, ladylike, and graceful. This was the enemy hial menace, Arles.

Desperately, she appealed to Rocheftort. “Ross! L-Let’s stop this! If it’ll save you, I’ll—!”

Rocheftort glared at her.

“Who said we’re stopping the fight?!” he and Inglis replied in

unison.

“You said that too?!”

“You said that as well?!”

The shouts didn’t completely match each other this time, but the meaning was the same.

“O-Oh! W-Weren’t you trying to help Ross?” The hial menace seemed to be a close friend of Rochefort’s. She probably hadn’t expected his fierce rejection of her earnest request, but Inglis’s reaction came as a complete shock to her.

“Yes, indeed,” Inglis replied.

“Then, shouldn’t you stop fighting? Give him his life in exchange for surrender?”

“What would that accomplish?”

“Wh-What do you mean? Well, you’d win, the fight would be over, and the danger would be gone...”

Inglis shook her head quietly in response. “That’s not what I’m looking for.”

“What?! Then what are you—?”

“I want him to eat this so we can resume our battle. I do not wish for his surrender. I’d be in a rather unfortunate position were he to give up.”

“Ah...! You’re—”

“A gesture of respect, huh?” Rochefort grumbled in obvious pain. If he didn’t hurry, it would be too late.

“No, I’m not just doing you a favor. What you’re talking about is a good deed for its own sake. I want something in return. Specifically, I want a thoroughly enjoyable battle with you.” There was, surely, nothing remarkable about paying for experience. Inglis could say that it was no different from the training provided at the knights’ academy in exchange for her tuition. This time, with her prospective foe an enemy’s holy knight and hial menace, the experience she was looking to buy was a match at full intensity. “So please, help yourself. It should get you back on your feet.”

Rochefort responded by laughing in her face. “You’re *crazy*! You could have just killed me easily while you had the chance, but instead you want to drag my corpse around because you’re looking for a fight! Your madness may well be the end of your country!”

Inglis smiled. “As long as it all works out in the end, it’s okay if I have a little fun—and I’m sure it will be fine.” In her mind, there would be no problems so long as she won—and she didn’t intend to lose. Therefore, it would be fine.

“Well, it would be nice if things worked out that way...” Rafinha sighed in response.

“Ah, Rani. It’s okay, right? Can I please do this? C’mon, wouldn’t

you just feel terribly sorry for him if it ended before he could do his thing? This is a warrior's compassion—"

"It's...complicated. And I don't particularly enjoy the idea of your beating up a sick man. I think we should only give him the meat if he surrenders."

"I agree as well..." Arles hesitantly agreed.

"C'mon, Rani! That'll be a waste!" Inglis complained.

"Arles! Don't ruin the fun!" Rochefort's blood-smeared mouth twisted into a grimace as he rebuked the hial menace before speaking to Inglis. "Ha ha ha! I think I like you! I'll eat that meat! Give it here!"

"Here you go... Is it tasty?"

Rochefort took the meat and tried to bring it to his mouth, but his hand was shaking so hard that he almost dropped it. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was already so weak. His willingness to fight Inglis head-on in such a state showed his indomitable fighting spirit. If she had encountered him in her past life, she would have wanted to develop him into a general who could spearhead her armies.

"Ross! Don't push yourself too hard! I'll—" Arles drew close to Rochefort and supported his shoulder. Taking the skewer from his hand, she brought it to his mouth. It was a gallant effort. "No matter what, as long as you live, I'll be by your side..."



“Ah... U— *Gwrk?!'*”

Again, Rochefort coughed up blood, staining Arles's armor.

“Ross?! Hold on! Eat this!”

“Ugh! Dammit!”

His body no longer has the strength to chew... This might be too late!

“Do your best! You only need a little!” Inglis cheered.

“If he can't eat, chew it for him! If you can just get it in his mouth, he'll be fine!” Rafinha quickly instructed Arles.

“O-Okay! Understood!” She quickly chewed the skewer, then brought her lips to Rochefort's, and tenderly dropped the chewed meat into his mouth.

“Ugh...” Somehow, he managed to swallow.

It had been a close call with not a minute to spare. Now all they could do was watch over him.

“Did we make it in time?” Rafinha asked, full of worry.

“I think he'll be fine thanks to eating at least some of the dragon meat. Good thinking, Rani. Any later and he might have been in trouble,” Inglis replied.

“I guess. We needed to do that for the king just a little earlier, after all,” Rafinha said.

“Huh? Whaaat?!” Inglis yelped in shock. “What in the world did you—” *I was so absorbed in the fight that I didn't even notice! I can't believe that she did that while caring for King Carlias!*

But Rafinha crooked her neck in confusion. “Huh? Why are you so surprised? His Majesty's life was in danger. Even feeding him the meat and then using my Gift at full power barely did the trick.”

“But, but...I didn't mean you should do *that!* I mean, he is the king, he is a very important person and all—”

“What are you talking about? It doesn't matter if he's important or not. Doing my best to help anyone I can is my duty as the holder of such a Gift.” Rafinha puffed up with pride.

“Rani...” *Her noble spirit is wonderful, Inglis thought. It's deserving of admiration, something to be proud of. However, she's just about the age when cutting those hopes and dreams down to size may save a lot of trouble in the future. Maybe, at least.*

What is this? I've never felt a shiver like this before. It's not excited anticipation of battle. It's loneliness, regret... Inglis flicked her eyes to where King Carlias was resting by the wall, watching the battle. She didn't know what expression was on her face, but—

“C'mon, Chris, don't glare like that!”

“I wasn't glaring! I was just staring!”

“Don't lie to me! You looked like you were about to attack him!”

“I would never!”

As her gaze struck him, King Carlias moaned. “Ugh... Aghhhh! I...I feel cold...”

The Royal Guard knights around him were in a panic.

“Your Majesty?!”

“He looks so pale!”

“I thought his condition was stable!”

“Rafinha!” Reddas called. “His Majesty... Please see to His Majesty!”

“On our way! Sheesh, Chris, it’s because you glared at him like that!”

“But—!”

“He may still need more!” Reddas said. “Then, I’ll do it again! My apologies, Your Majesty!” Reddas chewed the dragon meat, and fed it to King Carlias.

“Ah!” Inglis’s eyes lit up as she clapped. From what Reddas had said, he must have been the one to feed the king! Two burly men sharing food in such a manner wasn’t her thing at all, but right now, it made her eyes light up. “H-Hey, Rani! Did Reddas do it last time too? He did, right?”

“Yeah. Why? Ohhh... Well, I mean, his life was on the line, there’s no reason for you to get upset about it even if I had done it!”

“But you’re too young for such close contact, Rani!” Inglis chided her cousin while grinning and waving to Reddas. *He did well. That helped a lot.* Her gratitude was overflowing.

“Sheesh!” Rafinha began. “Well, I’m a bit grateful too... I want my first kiss to be with someone I love...” Her face turned red as if she was imagining something.

“No! No funny business!”

“You’re right, this isn’t the time for that! I’m going to go see to His Majesty!” Rafinha rushed to King Carlias’s side.

Inglis, regaining her composure, turned to Rochefort and Arles. “How’s it going over there?” she asked after an awkward pause.

“He ate the meat you gave us! But if there are any other healing Artifacts here, I’d appreciate their attention!” Arles desperately appealed to Inglis.

“I see. I don’t know how effective it’ll be, but...” Rafinha’s Gift was for healing trauma—that is, wounds—not necessarily illnesses. In the case of King Carlias, heavily injured in battle, the Gift and the meat had a synergistic effect—but in the case of Rochefort, the Gift’s effects might be limited. But Inglis did understand Arles’s heartfelt concern for him.

“Just a moment! I’ll be right there!” Rafinha, checking on King Carlias, called out to Arles.

“Y-Yes! Thank you!”

But as if to drown out those words, Rochefort, who had been resting his head on Arles's knee, rose with a start. "I don't need it!" He cackled once more. "Ha ha ha ha! Kept you waiting, didn't I? Well, I'll keep my promise! Let's continue the fight!"

"Yes, thank you." Inglis grinned as she nodded.

"W-Wait, Ross! You've only recovered a little bit—don't push yourself. Wait until you're fully healed!"

"I can't feebly sit around! We don't have time!"

"He's right," Inglis added. "If we don't hurry this up, I won't make it in time."

Both Inglis and Rochefort's being pressed for time left Arles puzzled. "Eh? If you recover, you'll have plenty of time, won't you? Why do you have to rush like that, and push yourself so hard? Such an effective medicine needs to be given time to do its work!"

"That's right, it's a miracle cure. My body may as well have been a corpse, but I can feel vitality returning to it, slowly but surely—eventually, I should recover. And—if I do, I won't be able to wield you for long!"

"Yes," Inglis agreed. "It's a miraculous level of mental strength that you were able to fight in such a physical condition. Like the last flickering of a candle before it goes out forever..."

"Ah...I-I see..." Arles began. "If he recovers too much, then... Then, I'll..."

Then, as a hial menace, she would do what hial menaces did. That is, absorb Rochefort's life force, causing his demise. That wouldn't be a disease or a wound, so the dragon meat would likely do nothing to stop it.

"So, unfortunately, if he recovers too much, he'll die in the end." Even Inglis couldn't demand a fight in which her opponent was sure to lose their life. Not only would she feel bad about it, it would be a waste. It would be far better to face him, unaided by a hial menace, over and over. Even without Arles's assistance, it was not every day that she met someone as strong as Rochefort. He had proved himself a match for a holy knight—for Rafael, specifically. Even if she couldn't use aether or her dragonscale sword at full power, he would still be a suitable opponent.

But if she could continue to fight with all her might for the short time that he hadn't fully recovered and was still able to avoid the effects of a hial menace, there was no reason not to. That short window was what she'd wanted to buy with the dragon meat. "So there isn't much time! Hurry up and turn back into a shield! C'mon, c'mon, c'mon!"

"You heard the lady, Arles! Hurry it up!" Rochefort barked.

Arles was clearly bewildered as the two urged her forward. "W-

Wait! If I do that, I'll eventually... It's dangerous!"

"I'm sure you can read his life force before the worst happens... You can, right?" Inglis recalled the hial menace Tiffanyer perceiving the life force flowing from her wielder when they fought in Alcard. She'd even realized that when that flow had stopped, Inglis had been drained of her power. Arles was also a hial menace, so Inglis concluded she was capable of the same.

"I...I can't really... Ross is only the second person who's wielded me since I became a hial menace..." Arles shook her head in fright.

"I see."

So, Arles is relatively inexperienced as a hial menace, Inglis thought. That makes sense. Her wielder can't fight for long and ends up burning away so quickly that even she doesn't really understand what's happening. Hial menaces are made, not born, after all. They're originally human women from the surface. Tiffanyer must have a long history as a hial menace to be able to recognize others' life force.

And I'm sure Eris and Ripple can perceive that too. They're carrying so much sorrow for what their wielders must go through because of them.

Inglis wasn't sure what they'd gone through in the past, and she didn't want to pry, but all the pain that had come from those experiences was why they were counting on her now to break that cycle. Naturally, Inglis was extremely grateful that they were calling on her to fight a strong foe.

"Calm down and focus. You can do this," she said to Arles. "If the flows feel any different, that's the sign to stop. You'll be fine. Believe in yourself—"

"D-Don't act like this is no big deal! Ross is finally cured! If anything happens to him, I..." She turned to him. "You don't have to fight so hard!"

Rocheft brushed her off. "No complaints, Arles!"

"Ross!"

"I've made the deal, so now I must pay the price! Responsible adults don't break their promises, do they?"

"B-But—! That isn't—"

"Plus...even if my life is saved here, my next foe is the Prismar. We may even have caused it to awaken. We can't ignore it. If Karelia is to become part of Venefic, then Karelians will be our subjects—we cannot abandon them."

"Ah! Th-That's..."

"Do you understand? What you're so fixated on now is just a detail."

"Y-You're right... It really is... I'm sorry..."

"So, will you let me enjoy your power for this one moment? As a warrior, my arms are crying out for action! A Runeless who would

alone face a holy knight wielding a hialal menace! She's a rebuke to how we think the world works! She's fascinating!"

"Ross! I...understand. If that's what you wish..." Arles nodded, determination in her eyes.

Inglis wanted to applaud Rochefort for a job well done, but she kept that to herself out of a worry it might change Arles's mind. For all Rochefort's feigned bloodthirst, he was actually intelligent and well spoken. What a fascinating human being he was.

"Sorry to keep you waiting! I'll serve as your opponent!"

Rochefort announced with a chuckle.

"Yes, please do." Inglis grinned and bowed in response.

As she did, Arles's body glowed dazzlingly and transformed.

Again with the golden shield in hand, Rochefort leaped backward to open a gap. "We have no time to waste! Let's finish this in one blow! I'll settle this with all I've got!"

"Then I'll do the same!" Inglis responded. *We only have a short time to fight without worries. I'll go all out!*

"Graaaaaaaahhhh!" With a booming shout, Rochefort lifted his shield to the heavens. Its shine became even brighter, and the overflowing light covered him in a dome. As it expanded, it reached the nearby walls.

Slamm! Rrruummmmbbllle!

And under the intense pressure, they crumbled like toy blocks. But this was just a shock wave. The vast majority of the dusty aether focused in the shield. It was stronger, more intense, than when Inglis and Rochefort had just clashed, and it was still growing.

"Rani! Everyone!" Inglis shouted. "Get farther away! If I mess this up, the palace is gonna be blown to pieces!"

"G-Got it! Be careful, Chris! As long as you're safe, that's all that matters!" Heeding Inglis's call, Rafinha and the knights boarded the Royal Guard's Flygears.

Reddas bit his lip in disappointment. "Ugh...! But what of the captain's uniform cut to suit Inglis, or the food we've prepared?!"

"Wait! Did you hear that?!" Rafinha corrected herself. "There's food! And a cute outfit! You have to protect those both! If you get hurt doing it, I can heal you!"

"You don't have to change your mind that quickly. But I get it! Leave it to me!" Inglis responded to Rafinha, taking a deep breath and readying her dragonscale sword. "Then, here I go! Haaaaah!"

Through her grip on the dragonscale sword, she sent aether into the blade. When she fought using Aether Shell, some also found its way into the sword, but that was just a side effect—something that

couldn't be avoided if the sword was in her hands at the time.

But this was different. She *intentionally* focused aether into the dragonscale sword and condensed it. The blade, infused with a large amount of aether, took on Inglis's pale blue glow and lit up brighter and brighter. As bright—no, even more blinding than Rochefort's shield. Brighter than even her Aether Strike or Aether Shell. It was on a level with the explosion created by her most powerful technique, Aether Breaker, during its culminating moment.

In other words, the sword had already been imbued with an immense amount of aether. Although aether underlaid all things, it was a difficult power to control. For Inglis, the maximum amount of power she could unleash at one time was Aether Strike. Seeking yet more destructive force, she had developed Aether Breaker. That forced more power into the mix by combining an Aether Strike with an Aether Shell-powered blow.

But with a weapon like this sword that could endure aether, there was no need to go to that trouble. The sword itself could accumulate aether. Since it was focused in one place, it would diffuse less, and should be less effort than Aether Breaker while drawing forth the same level of power.

No, that wouldn't satisfy her. She wanted more! All the aether!

Inglis laughed to herself. "A good sword, if I do say so myself! Built to take everything I have!"

Rochefort grunted. "I suppose that means I should bring more too!" As he poured more and more energy in, the shock waves spread farther and farther.

"If you try to put the energy into your body, the excess power will diffuse outward. If you think of the shield as part of your body and focus the energy into it instead, I think less will be wasted," Inglis advised.

Unlike Rochefort, whose overflowing power was destroying the palace, Inglis was having far less of an impact: just some cracks in the ground by her feet. It wasn't because what she was doing was less powerful, but because the aether was condensed into her sword, limiting the waste.

"Ha ha! Another gesture of respect, huh! You sure like doing that, don't you?!"

"No, as I said before, this isn't a good deed for its own sake. I only want to fight strong foes—the stronger, the better."

"I see—how about this?!"

Rochefort's shield shone even more brightly. At the same time, the dome of light covering him shrank. It was proof that he'd focused the dusty aether into his shield. And thus, the destructive power of the shield had increased in proportion.

“Yes, that’s it! Great job!” Inglis encouraged.

“It’s still too early to praise me!” The gems in Rochefort’s shield began to glow different colors. He wanted to fire a barrage of light and follow it into the fight while his opponent was preoccupied—and he was able to do so, now that he wasn’t wasting his power.

Inglis was pleased her advice had helped him so much. Now it would pay her dividends.

He cackled. “So much power! I can’t wait to see what happens when we clash!”

“Yes, indeed!”

“Are you ready?!”

“Yes! Let’s levy our full power at each other!”

Rochefort leveled his shield at Inglis, and Inglis raised her sword, ready to crash down on Rochefort. “Here I come!” His shield flashed blindingly.

Boooooom!

Both the white light from the shield itself and light of different colors from the gems all mixed together in a blast as beautiful as it was huge, several times the height of a person. There was no doubt that Rochefort had put his all into his attack on Inglis.

“You’ll get me at my best as well! Haaaaah!”

Swiftly responding, Inglis pumped as much aether as she could into her dragonscale sword and slammed it downward. The aether released from the blade formed a huge crescent-shaped wave along the flash of its arc.

Rrrrrumble!

A mass of aether just as grand as the light emitted from the shield, it was a single blow with almost all the aether of several Aether Strikes put together. It plunged toward the light of the shield, carving into the ground in its wake.

Boooooooooooooom!

The shield’s light, the sword’s flash...

As they collided with a thundering roar, a pillar of light shot up from where they met, digging a crater in the ground. The destruction wrought by this clash was so intense that it completely obliterated the traces of the earlier fight. If it continued, not a trace would be left of the palace.

“Well?! What will come of this?!” Rochefort swayed on one knee

as he watched the result of their attacks. He had put every bit of mental and physical stamina he had into that one blow, to the point that he was unable to move.

Inglis was the same—that had taken almost all the aether she had. She felt exhausted. Her legs wobbled like noodles.

But no matter how I feel...

“O, Dragon Lore!” she called.

I still have the power I got from Fufailbane!

Inglis’s sword, poised for a horizontal sweep, was now filled with the energy of a dragon rising in pale majesty.

“What?! How can you still go on?!” Rochefort exclaimed.

“This is my *full* power! Haaaaah!” Inglis focused the dragon lore into her sword and slashed sideways. The wave of dragon lore which followed her blade formed the shape of a huge dragon tail and shot toward where the aether and dusty aether were colliding.



Having a weapon that could serve as a vessel for aether, she no longer needed to resort to desperate measures like Aether Breaker to increase her destructive power. She could just pour all her power into the sword—and let it rip.

Nonetheless, the process of adding more force to a previous technique to make it explode was effective. This was a reflection of that: pouring all her aether into her first strike, then detonating it with dragon lore. She had to be careful not to let her first attack fizzle before her dragon lore took effect—but the aether she released stayed at the point of impact!

A flash of light brighter than those before suddenly filled her vision completely. The pressure of the dragon lore changed the flow of the collision, pushing it toward Rochefort as it exploded.

“Aaaaaah!”

Boooooommmmmmm!

Rochefort’s scream was drowned out by the explosive burst of light swelling from the collision toward him. Its force blew away the walls in the direction Inglis faced, leaving a gigantic crater—one so huge that the entire palace could have fit inside.

“Ohhhhh!”

“T-Tremendous! As expected from her!” The knights were all slack-jawed, overwhelmed. The damage had been fearsome—but luckily, it had been confined to the gardens and walls, as well as a part of the canal connecting to Lake Bolt. It was because of the lay of the terrain that Inglis had been able to do this. The palace buildings were still intact.

Water from Lake Bolt had already begun to flow into the crater. It was like a waterfall too deep to see through. Looking at it now, Inglis had wrought destruction on a massive scale. However, as the water flowed in, it would cover most of the damage, with nearly half the palace grounds converted into a new canal both wider and deeper. That would not pose much of a problem.

Inglis stood at the edge of the crater, nodding with a brisk smile on her face. “Yeah. Not bad for my first try.”

Chapter V: Inglis, Age 15—Squire and Captain (2)

The sword forged from Fufailbane's scales was the key to a new composite technique incorporating both aether and dragon lore —“Aether Cross Lore,” Inglis called it.

“Not shabby at all. Terrifying, in fact,” Rochefort muttered in disgust. Inglis was holding him by the scruff of his neck. “If I'd taken the full brunt of that, I wouldn't have even left a skeleton behind. I'd appreciate it if you didn't point that thing at humans.”

Immediately after her second shot of dragon lore, Inglis had activated Aether Shell, getting ahead of it at full speed and saving him.

“There are only a few people who would stand still and try to take that. And I *did* save you, so I hope you don't mind,” Inglis replied, beaming.

He paused before asking, “Why did you save me, though?”

“Because that would have been a waste. If you're dead, I can't fight you. Once you recover, let's fight again. I'll handle the revived Prismers, so don't worry about that. I'd actually prefer to fight it myself.”

“Good luck with that one. If you can smile like that while taking down a Prismers, that's the most peaceful the world will ever be. I'll pass on the rematch, though. Don't really wanna get sent back to rehab *again* right after I recover.”

The golden shield he bore shined and returned to human form. Arles bowed her head deeply to Inglis. “Th-Thank you! Thank you so much for saving Ross!” Her love for Rochefort was palpable in her bow, as was her concern for him and her kindly disposition. It felt totally at odds with Rochefort's daring suicide mission.

Inglis was satisfied, having fought hard against the duo, but she still had some lingering questions. “Why did you decide to do this anyway?”

“I-It was for my sake... I'm Venefic's only hial menace, so... If anything happens, it all falls to me... But if we conquered Karelia and made your hial menaces ours, we'd be able to share the burden...”

Rochefort had been concerned for Arles's fate after his death. And, well, the motivation made sense. A country with only one hial menace had no choice but to press everything onto her. Karelia had

both Eris and Ripple, who could each shoulder half the burden. They were able to continue the hard work of defending Karelia in large part because they could cheer each other up; their strong bond was obvious. If Venefic had conquered Karelia, it would naturally have taken on their hial menaces, and then there would have been three—significantly lessening Arles’s burden.

“No matter how much I wrangle with the skinflints up top in Venefic, they’re not gonna cough up for any more hial menaces. My only option was to take them from someone else—it was supposed to be my last blaze of glory. I wasn’t expecting it to turn out like *this*, though. You never know what the world has in store...” Rochefort shrugged in a self-deprecating manner.

“You must think so horribly of us because of what we’ve done!” Arles said. “But I couldn’t stop him—I’m so sorry!”

“You don’t need to apologize, Arles,” Rochefort said. “I was the one who put you up to it—let’s go with that.”

“No, you don’t need to apologize to me,” Inglis said. “I got to have a nice fight out of all of this. Thank you.” She bowed to them.

“Ross, this girl...”

“Yeah, she’s crazy. Even more than I am. Fascinating.” Rochefort laughed.

“However,” Inglis said, “the rest will be left up to His Majesty, and I have no control over his decisions.” If King Carlias decided to execute them, Inglis would be unable to stop that. If he jailed them, she could probably break in and bust them out—but then she wouldn’t be able to stay in Karelia, and she’d be causing a lot of trouble for Rafinha, Rafael, and the rest of her family. It wouldn’t be worth the cost.

King Carlias walked over to them, albeit with an unsteady gait. It was amazing he could already walk. “These two will be taken as prisoners of war,” he pronounced. “They will be judged at a later date... First, they must heal their wounds.”

“Your Majesty!” Arles gasped.

“That is what Inglis wishes, is it not? I shall make it so. Again, she has saved me from danger. I thank her.” King Carlias bowed his head to Inglis as he spoke.

“You don’t have to! I only did what came naturally!” Inglis daintily bowed her head and kneeled in front of King Carlias, stirring excitement among the knights.

“Ahh, Lady Inglis! So elegant!”

“And so beautiful!”

“Impressive, Lady Inglis!” Reddas said. “We were already in awe of you, but now we’re even more deeply impressed!” The knights nodded along with his words.

But not everyone shared that appreciation.

“Ahh, I knew it. It was just, ‘Ooh, he looks strong! All right! I wanna fight! Off I go!’ Classic Chris...” Rafinha had quietly joined Inglis, muttering to herself. “There’s no need to thank the girl who just decided she wanted to make a mess.”

“Shhh, Rani! You’re not supposed to tell them that!”

If you were lucky enough to meet a powerful foe, you engaged in battle. It was only natural that she’d done so. That was why she required no thanks, but others were free to make what assumptions they liked. If her actions were to be taken as patriotism or loyalty, she didn’t mind. It didn’t change what had actually happened, so in Inglis’s mind, there was no problem with others mischaracterizing her motives.

“Hm? What was that?” King Carlias asked.

“Oh, nothing!” Inglis responded. “Anyway, sorry, but unfortunately I damaged the walls and the canal. I sincerely apologize.”

“That matters not. I do not intend to penalize you for the damage. You did well.” King Carlias nodded to Inglis. “I have heard news of your exploits in Alcard. I would reward your valor—what do you desire?”

“If...you would be so kind as to condemn him to fighting me again after he recovers.”

Inglis had gained many things in Alcard: a new power—dragon lore; a dragonscale sword—one which could withstand her aether at full power; and dragon meat—both delicious and curative.

But she still lacked something—a foe she could fight whenever she liked.

She’d wanted to delve into the same technology of Evel’s that had replicated Ian. She’d wanted to bring Fufailbane home with her. However, the mechanical dragon, which she assumed carried Evel’s technology, had fused itself with Fufailbane and departed for Highland. It would have been nice to secure at least one of them—but here she was, still with the need for someone she could fight whenever she wanted.

She suddenly felt her ear being pulled from the side.

“C’mom, Chris! Don’t say something silly like that! That’s too much! You just saved him, and now you want to subject him to a fate worse than death?”

“Oww! That’s not true! It’s a divine trial that just happens to let us constantly be very effective at improving each other—I’m sure he’ll love it!”

“I don’t mind being scolded by a beautiful woman,” Rochefort said, “but I’d rather that not be my life forever. Just lop off my head

instead.”

“See, he doesn’t want to!” Rafinha insisted. “That kind of thing is for magicite beasts only! No way! Okay?!”

“Yeah, okay!” Inglis replied.

“Huh? You sure took that in stride.”

“So that means I can have a magicite beast for a pet?” *Then I’ll give up on Rochefort and just do that.*

“Absolutely not! What is wrong with you?!”

“Awww, but you just said it was okay! No fair, Rani!”

“Fighting them and keeping one as a pet are completely different! Anyway! No! No means no! Okay?!”

“Ugh...”

Arles bowed her head to Rafinha deeply. “Thank you...”

“No, you’re welcome. I’m sorry Chris was saying absurd things like that. First of all, just focus on getting better. I’m sure he’ll be fine,” Rafinha answered, first smiling and then looking like she’d just realized something. Then, she bowed very deeply to King Carlias. “I’m sorry, Your Majesty! I was just—”

“No, I do not mind. Well, then! Someone, find a place for this man to recuperate. Hialar menace of Venefic! I place you under arrest. I trust you do not object?”

“O-Of course not! I thank you from the bottom of my heart for saving Ross!” Arles bowed very, very deeply to King Carlias.

Rochefort snorted scornfully. “How moving, Your Majesty! Sparing the life of an enemy general who nearly killed you. You must be as crazy as that girl.” He smiled with insincerity, but King Carlias was not the sort to be affected by sarcasm or provocations. He had withstood Evel’s humiliation when the Highlander had visited the palace. Compared to that, Rochefort’s words may have been simply droll.

“Hmm... Which is more mad, though? My act of sparing you two, or appointing this girl as the captain of an order of knights?” King Carlias responded with a grin.

Rochefort cackled. “Just a jape...perhaps. Pardon me.”

King Carlias let silence hang over the room for a moment before ordering, “Take them away.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Reddas and the knights nodded, leading Rochefort and Arles away.

“Oh good, His Majesty realizes making Chris the captain of an order of knights is as scary as almost getting killed...” Rafinha muttered as she watched them leave.

“That’s not very nice,” Inglis objected. “Even if I do get to spar with him, I’ll make sure he isn’t seriously wounded.”

“That isn’t what I meant—”

As Inglis and Rafinha bickered, King Carlias called out to them.
“Rafinha...”

“Huh? Ah, yes?” Rafinha was a bit flustered, as this was the first time King Carlias had called for her directly.

“You as well saved my life. Not once, but twice. Let me thank you —”

“Oh, it was nothing—Chris said the same, but it was the natural thing to do! You are our king, after all!”

As Rafinha stood at respectful attention, King Carlias smiled.
“What do you desire? Your achievements are no less than those of Inglis.”

“Oh, it’s okay! Just like Inglis, I didn’t really—”

Inglis pinched Rafinha’s lips shut.

“Wuhveh vu vunh, Hlif?! (What are you doing, Chris?!)”

“She does have one wish! But it doesn’t look like she can say it, so I’ll speak for her.” A sly smile drifted to Inglis’s face.



Barely an hour later, Inglis and Rafinha were in a room in the palace. The sound of fabric shuffling had stopped—Inglis had finished changing. Her hair, which had been ruffled from the battle, was also freshly combed.

“There, that’s perfect! You really do look good in absolutely everything! ♪ Now turn around for me—twirl, twiiir! ♪ And give me a smile!”

“Sure. Of course, Rani.” Inglis, as instructed, spun twice, then a third time, in front of a large mirror. Her cape, which floated in the air as she did, was embroidered with a large and highly visible version of the insignia of he—or she—who commanded Karelia’s Royal Guard.

“This outfit’s great! I always thought it would be pretty cute.”

“Yeah, you’re absolutely right, Rani.” Inglis had always admired the outfit her hial menace friends got to wear.

“And I think it’s perfect for what we’re about to do! I don’t want to get too hung up on the formalities, but it really makes a difference!” Her breath was ragged with excitement.

“I love how cute this is. Plus, now I match Eris and Ripple.” The uniform prepared for her appointment was based on the one the two hial menaces wore, but this one had a rank insignia added to the cape. It reflected Karelia’s culture and traditions. Inglis had appreciated how they’d looked in uniform, and she felt fortunate to try it on herself.

“I think they’re implying that you need to follow in their footsteps and not do anything silly.”

“Well, I have no intention of being just like them. I’m taking a

different approach, one where I'll have a fun fight where no one has to sacrifice themselves."

"You *will* win, right? We *will* make it in time?" Rafinha's expression was suddenly serious as she gripped Inglis's hand. The battle here with Rochefort had only been a prelude. It was very good to have gotten a chance to try out the dragonscale sword and a new technique utilizing it—but the real fight awaited. The Prismers had not yet reached the forward operating base at Ahlemin, but after a brief ceremony, they had to hurry along. Rafinha was clearly worried.

"Leave it to me," Inglis responded. "I'm your squire, Rani. I won't let anything happen that would make you sad."

"Remember—I believe in you."

"I know. It'll be okay. Anyway, let's go. His Majesty and Reddas are waiting."

The others had waited for Inglis and Rafinha to change before the ceremony. Taking Rafinha's hand, Inglis led her from the dressing room, her chest tight with nervousness.

"Hmm...I think this is a bit tight."

Perhaps it was also the uniform. The fabric was stretched across her chest, a bit uncomfortably.

"I guess it's for Eris and Ripple... It's a bit...constraining..." As she spoke, she fiddled with her top to loosen it. That, at least, improved things a little.

Rafinha sulked at her. "What are you doing, bragging? Mine's so loose!"

"Oh...? Aha ha ha, I think yours looks great. Don't worry about it. It's fine. You're adorable."

Whenever Rafinha shot her a look about this topic, Inglis normally found Rafinha's hands on her or Rin aggressively crawling over her, so Inglis hastily tried to smooth things over.

Rafinha had also changed into the uniform of the Royal Guard's captain. The cut was the same, but where it strained for Inglis, it hung limply for her.

As they left the dressing room, they were greeted by the voices of Reddas and the knights.

Several knights gasped. "Ah! How—"

"Those uniforms look so good on both of you!" others exclaimed.

Hearing them, Inglis tried to cheer up Rafinha. "S-See? Everyone says they look good on us. It'll be fine."

Rafinha sighed, and her sulky expression turned to nervousness. "Are... Are you sure about this? Having me do this...?"

Inglis and Rafinha were both in the uniform Eris and Ripple wore—and both bore the insignia that marked them as commanders. Inglis would be, for this battle, the lieutenant of the Order of the Royal

Guard and the lieutenant-colonel of the Royal Guard in the field. Rafinha would be, for now, the captain of the Order of the Royal Guard and the colonel of the Royal Guard in the field. That was what Inglis had answered for Rafinha, when King Carlias had asked for her wish.

“It’ll be fine. His Majesty gave his assent. You should be proud.”

“B-But...still...”

“You’ll be fine. We’re doing the same thing as always, remember?”

In other words, go toe-to-toe with a powerful foe, together. She could just think of it as King Carlias giving his stamp of approval to their actions. “It’s temporary, so we can go back to the knights’ academy when it’s over—and after all, I *am* your squire. This way is more natural. If command were mine alone, as a squire I wouldn’t be able to demand the proper respect, would I?”

In what world could a squire overtake their knight, who they were supposed to serve, in rank? At that point, they could no longer be called a squire. But Inglis Eucus was sure that she was Rafinha’s squire. That was how she’d chosen to live, and that was absolute. So—even if it were a formality—she wanted Rafinha to stand above her. That was why Inglis was the lieutenant and lieutenant-colonel, and Rafinha the captain and colonel.

Rafinha chuckled in amusement. “I’m not really sure what you mean by that, but I’m sure you have your reasons.”

“I do.” If Rafinha had done nothing, this would have been impossible, but thanks to King Carlias offering to fulfill a wish for Rafinha, Inglis could take this opportunity to arrange their positions as such. King Carlias no doubt felt that this would keep her on a shorter leash, which was fine by Inglis. This would let her feel more comfortable as she went into battle with the Prismers, so it presented her with no problems. It was a win-win situation.

“Well, fine. The colonel is supposed to issue the lieutenant-colonel strategic orders, right? I believe the traditional one is ‘do something about this.’ Is that okay?”

“Yes, understood.”

The two smiled at each other as they made their way before King Carlias. Filled with tantalizing smells, the hall was already prepared for a banquet. Inglis had heard something was planned as a celebration, but she hadn’t expected this quantity or quality of food. “Ooh, this is incredible!”

“Wow!” Rafinha gasped. “I want some of the fish! And then some crab and some shrimp!”

“Yeah. We’ve been eating so much dragon meat lately, some seafood will be a nice change of pace!” Dragon meat may have been the most delicious thing they’d ever tasted, but after all meat all the

time, it was only human to want some variety. And the selection of dishes seemed to be just what was needed to satisfy those cravings.

King Carlias cleared his throat. “And here you both are—girded for the battle that will decide the future of our land. Those uniforms suit you well.”

Inglis and Rafinha nodded in satisfaction at his greeting. “Thank you!” The two bowed reverently and kneeled before him.

“The situation affords no delay. I will make this short—in this time of danger, I entrust Inglis Eucus and Rafinha Bilford with full authority over the Royal Guard. You are to set forth at once for Ahlemin and destroy the Prismer!”

“Yes!” Again, Inglis and Rafinha’s voices overlapped.

“Lady Inglis! Lady Rafinha! Congratulations!” Reddas was the first to raise his voice and begin to clap.

The knights gave their own applause as well. “Congratulations!”

“Lead us well!”

“Then, I have prepared a meager feast for you,” the king pronounced. “At least for a short while, you can refresh yourselves.”

“Yes! Thank you!”

Just as Inglis and Rafinha’s eyes began to gleam, though, a knight rushed inside, panicking.

“Your Majesty! Your Majesty! A message from Ahlemin! The Prismer is approaching the outskirts of the town!”

“Wh—?! That’s sooner than I had heard!” Inglis exclaimed. The assumption had been that she had several days to spare, but the movements of the Prismer seemed to have changed. She couldn’t be certain what that meant, but it probably wasn’t good. There was no time to waste.

“We need to hurry to Rafael’s side!” Rafinha insisted.

However...

Grrrrgl! Grrrrrrrrrgl!

Sometimes their stomachs had different plans.

Inglis and Rafinha looked at each other, then bowed deeply. “Forgive us, Your Majesty!” they said, and before long, the two were off.

“All right, Chris! Full speed ahead!”

“Yeah! Let’s go!” Inglis pulled hard on the *Star Princess*’s mode-shifter.

Clunk! Whirrrrr!

Its engines roared to life. With the distance to Ahlemin taken into account, this was the fastest way. It had been loaded aboard the Steelblood Front ship when they had returned from Alcard and used by Reddas, who was the first to arrive at the palace.

“We’re off!”

“Mm. I’m counting on you!” King Carlias nodded to Inglis and Rafinha. They shot him their best fearless expressions.

Inglis and Rafinha took that as their cue to depart. Each carried a large package. Specifically, it was the food which had just been served. They had wrapped it up to go—in the insignia-emblazoned capes which they had just been given. They couldn’t do anything like eating it in front of King Carlias, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t scarf it down as they flew.

“Lady Inglis is truly unpredictable!”

“Wrapping up the food in her cape?!”

“I’m in awe...”

As the *Star Princess* sped away, the knights muttered among themselves.

“A trifling matter set against much greater ones. An army marches on its stomach, after all,” King Carlias responded calmly.



The town of Ahlemin was spending a sleepless night racked with tension and clamor.

“Hurry it up! The enemy’s almost here! To your places!”

“All entrances to the tunnels are open! Be ready to fall back quickly at any moment!”

This Prismer had been encased in ice, originally laid to rest in Ahlemin. The town’s development had always taken the Prismer’s presence in mind when planning. Subterranean tunnels were just one aspect of this, and they had been further expanded in preparation for this battle. Food and supplies had been brought in, transforming the place into an underground fortress. Under both Ambassador Theodore and his predecessor Ambassador Muenthe, Karelia’s forces had begun to adopt Flygears and Flygear Ports, but the mechanization of their forces was far from complete. These preparations were intended to allow infantry on foot to remain under cover while fighting over a wide area.

As the knights nervously rushed from their tunnels to take up position to fight the Prismer, Yua watched the lurid scene blankly. She was seated on the roof of the tallest building in town, her legs dangling in the air. She thought it was probably the building where the Prismer had been kept. Others had commented that it wasn’t the best place to relax, but she liked it there. It felt like home, somehow.

When she had free time, she slacked off on the roof, which was precisely what she was doing now.

“Heeey! Yua!” She heard her name called from an approaching Flygear.

“Sup, Beanpole?” It was her classmate at the knights’ academy, Morris—one of her few friends.

“What do you mean, ’sup?! Don’t you see the commotion?! The Prismers’ coming!” Silva yelled angrily from a separate Flygear. The students from the knights’ academy had mostly gathered in one place, but when Yua was still absent, they’d asked Morris for her location. Naturally, Silva had come to collect her.

“Sorry, Four-Eyes. It feels good here...”

“Quite the big shot, aren’t you?” Silva scoffed. “Not afraid of a single thing even in a situation like this, just going on with life as usual.”

“Ah, praise. Thanks.”

“No, that wasn’t praise! It was sarcasm!” Though, if he were to be honest, it would be half praise. While everyone else was trying to tamp down their fear and face the Prismers, Yua was calm and unaffected. That was impressive, at least.

“Whew, looking at you I’m beginning to think we might have a chance. You’re not intimidated at all.” Morris sighed.

“There’s no reason to be intimidated,” Yua replied. “It’s not that scary... You know, I can sense it...”

“Anyway...let’s group up and join Principal Miriela! Morris will give you a ride!” Silva said.

“Sure thing.” Yua nimbly leaped onto Morris’s Flygear.

“All right, let’s go!” With Silva in the lead, they set a course for the sector running along the eastern wall. Sailing through the air above the town, Silva suddenly grunted. “Here they come! I’ve spotted a swarm of magicite beasts!”

A group of birdlike magicite beasts dotted the eastern sky. Silva shouted to quickly inform the knights formed up on the ground. “Everyone! I’ve spotted the enemy to the east! Several flocks of birdlike magicite beasts! But they’re carrying something in their feet... Wait—those are humanoids! Humanoid magicite beasts!”

“They’re what?!”

“What the hell?!”

“Is that even possible?!”

A stir spread among the knights on the ground. Was Silva mistaken? He certainly wasn’t lying. Still, he’d seen demihuman magicite beasts before, but these seemed different. And besides, he knew the demihuman ones had been wiped out. There was no way there’d be more.

So just what were these?

The Prismer had an effect like the Prism Flow itself, transforming the local fauna into magicite beasts. Were these Highlanders who had been transformed, since they were vulnerable to the Prism Flow? No, there were too many. There was no way so many Highlanders would have approached the Prismer. They lived in Highland precisely so they could avoid the threat of Prismers and the Prism Flow.

“S-Silva! What are those?!” Morris asked.

“I don’t know! Anyway, we need to tell the principal!” Silva and the others rushed toward the knights’ academy’s Flygear Port, which hovered over the eastern walls. Miriela was there, commanding her students.

“Principal Miriela!” Silva called.

“Ah, Silva! Thank you for bringing Yua!”

“There’s an emergency! What are those humanoid magicite beasts?! I doubt they’re Highlanders, and weren’t the demihuman magicite beasts wiped out?!”

“I don’t know, but we don’t have time to think about it right now! Magicite beasts are magicite beasts! Intercept them without hesitation!” Miriela said sharply, bearing a stern expression.

“But—!” Just as Silva spoke, he felt something like a morning mist suddenly fill the air around him. It shimmered faintly, in every color of the rainbow.

The knights on the ground were in an uproar.

“Huh?! What’s that?!”

“Is it doing something like the Prism Flow?!”

“Stay on guard! Even the smallest animal around you may become a magicite beast!”

Suddenly, one knight collapsed after letting out a guttural “Gahhhhhh!” Then, just like that, his body began to transform. It bloated, gained a hard, stony outer skin, and began to glitter like a gem.

“H-He turned into a magicite beast?!” another knight screamed.

“Impossible! How can a man turn into a magicite beast?!” Silva gasped. His fears had not been mistaken. He was watching a horror unfold before his eyes. It was no trick, no illusion. This was reality. And that knight wasn’t the only one screaming...

“Gah! Aaagh! It burns! The Prism Powder—?!” Morris, piloting a Flygear with Yua riding behind him, began to tremble and squirm. As if something was hidden under his clothes, a bright light shined in every color from his chest.

“Morris! I don’t know what that thing is, but get rid of it! It’s dangerous!”

But Silva’s words didn’t reach him in time. The Flygear lost

control and crashed to the ground.

“Ah—?!” Yua managed to leap out and land safely. But Morris, along with the aircraft, came to a crashing halt, and just like the knight before, his body began to transform. “Beanpole...?” she asked.

“Grahhhhhhhh!”

With that, Morris was no longer human.

Extra: Rafinha vs. Leon

Faint moonlight shone through a round window, and a throbbing hum echoed from far away. Closer to Inglis, there was faint breathing and a feeling of warmth. Rafinha was the source of both. They were aboard the Steelblood Front's battleship, en route to Karelia, spending a quiet night together.

That was unusual. Typically, Rafinha's energetic snores made nights quite lively. Inglis had gotten used to it, but others had quite the hard time bearing it. When sharing rooms on their expedition to Alcard, Leone and Liselotte had needed earplugs to get through the night. When they'd camped out, even Lahti, a tent over, had complained.

Rafinha only slept this quietly when going through something painful or sorrowful—when her mental state was unsettled. Having grown up with her, Inglis knew this quite well. As much as Rafinha tried to seem like she was taking things well, she must have been anxious about the impending danger to Rafael. Resting, those thoughts grew even worse, and her worries made her energetic snores disappear.

"It's okay, Rani. It'll be okay. I'll make it all better." Inglis lay beside Rafinha, stroking her hair. Rafinha was using her as an overgrown pillow, hugging her and resting her head on Inglis's chest. They still often slept in the same bed, but Rafinha only clung to her so quietly in times like this when something troubled her deeply. If Inglis could ignore those troubles, she wouldn't mind that much. This was the only time when she could see Rafinha's calm, quiet sleeping face.

"Brother... We'll do our best..." Rafinha was talking in her sleep. She must have been dreaming of fighting hard to save Rafael.

"Yes, we will. Let's do our best." Inglis rubbed Rafinha's back and was about to close her eyes—only to feel something creeping along her chest. The culprit was Rafinha's hand.

Inglis sighed. Unconsciously reaching for Inglis's chest at times like these was a habit Rafinha had had since long ago, quite possibly one she had had since Inglis's aunt Irina had rocked her to sleep as a baby. Rafinha had done this to Inglis even before Inglis had had anything there to reach for. Surely Rafinha didn't realize that she still did it, and Inglis did not particularly reject the sleepy habit, recognizing that it helped Rafinha feel at ease. Perhaps that was why

Rafinha still did it. In any case, to Inglis, the usual snores were a bigger cause for complaint.

“Maybe they got this big because of you doing this...” Inglis laughed wryly, and closed her eyes. She wondered if maybe that thought had just come to mind because of Rafinha’s persistent efforts to grow her own via massage in the bath.

Rafinha squeezed, and squeezed, and squeezed, like her hand had become more energetic. No, both her hands. Inglis felt those smooth hands slide inside her clothes. “Mm... W-Wait, Rani... Not that hard... Nnn!”

Maybe I’m just too exhausted. Inglis figured her cousin was probably doing the usual, so she opened her eyes...

They met Rafinha’s, which were wide open.

“Ah?! Rani!”

“Oh? Ah, you’re awake. Did that get you a little excited?”

“A-Absolutely not! I wasn’t even asleep yet! And don’t do weird things when you’re awake! Sheesh!”

“Eh, when I woke up your chest was right in front of my eyes, and you weren’t complaining, so I thought I’d have some fun! ♪ I had a bad dream, so I wanted something to lighten my mood.”

“What was the dream?”

“We were all at Rafael’s funeral.” Rafinha’s voice wavered a bit.

“Rani...” Inglis hugged Rafinha tightly. “Just this once, okay? Get that bad dream out of your head. But do try to be a little gentler.”

Rafinha chuckled. “It’s fine. I just want to see how much you’ve grown. It’s not like I’m a baby.”

But you have been doing this since you were a baby. Oh well, if you don’t realize it, there’s no reason to actually bring it up.

“But, mmm! I’m wide awake now. I don’t know if I’ll be able to fall back asleep.” Rafinha slid from the berth. The moonlight from the window still showed no sign of dawn.

“Maybe get some exercise, then?” Inglis asked.

“Yeah. That will help distract me—and it’s an excuse for a midnight snack!”

“So down to the hangar, then?” It was large enough for a workout, and it was acting as storage for Fufailbane’s tail, which they’d brought along as one whole piece. They could cut a little bit off for that midnight snack.

“Yeah. Let’s go, Chris.”

They weren’t alone, though.

Clang! Bash-bash-bash!

As Inglis and Rafinha headed toward the hangar, loud noises

echoed from within, as if someone was banging on something.

“Leon!” the two called out at the same time.

Leon was striking the dragon tail in the hangar with his Artifact gauntlets. Inglis could have sworn those weapons looked to be shaped a bit differently than before. In any case, the loud echoes told of the intensity of the strikes.

“Hm? Oh, hey, you two. Couldn’t sleep? You should make sure to rest when you can though.” Leon wiped the sweat from his brow and smiled.

“Yeah... Make sure you rest too, Leon,” Rafinha replied. “Are you training? It’s so late.”

“I guess... Sorry, but I’m borrowing this thing you brought. This is a dragon’s tail, right? The scales are incredibly hard—they’re perfect for punching.”

“I don’t mind—but wouldn’t a moving target do you more good?” Inglis grinned as she called out to Leon.

“No thanks. I don’t think I’d hit *that* target no matter how much I punched at it, and it’s liable to hit me back so hard I’d be throwing up blood. Don’t wanna get myself too hurt to do anything when we’re about to go fight a Prismer.”

“Oh, really? A lady finally works up the nerve to invite you to a late-night dalliance, and you turn her down? That’s unkind... And I was so curious about your new Artifact too...” Inglis was literally open-mouthed in anticipation.

“I don’t think most ladies have quite the definition of ‘dalliance’ you do...” Leon laughed wryly, and went back to punching the dragon tail. His blows were intense—but uneven and desultory. Not like him at all. Inglis thought she might know why.

“This brother of Lahti’s, Prince Windsel, that’s commanding the Alcardian forces approaching the camp where Leone and the others stayed behind—is he strong?” Inglis asked with a smile, and Leon stopped punching again.

“A few of us have infiltrated Alcard too. They were just there to gather intel, of course.”

The Prism Flow didn’t fall much on Alcard, so damage from magicite beasts was limited. Therefore, Alcard’s dependence on Highland was limited, and the Steelblood Front, organized to oppose Highland, didn’t consider it a significant theater of operations. However, Highland’s increased activity, first through Evel and then Tiffanyer, must have convinced them that they needed eyes on the ground there. “But yeah, about Prince Windsel, their commanding officer...rumor is he just got a special-class Rune.”

“Special-class?!” Rafinha gasped. “Like Rafael’s or yours?! I thought that was something one was born with!”

“Well, I’ve heard of lower-class Runes improving to middle-class. It isn’t unheard of for them to grow—though it does take another pass through the baptismal tabernacle. But this is the first I’ve ever heard of one turning into a special-class.”

“B-But then...they have to fight that strong of a knight? Oh, then —!”

Leon waited a moment for her to continue. “Then, what?”

Rafinha shook her head. “Oh, nothing...”

She must have felt it would be insensitive to say any more. And she was right. Inglis agreed. This was why she had asked Leon the leading question she had. Leon wasn’t sleepless like this because of worry about the upcoming fight with the Prismers. He was worried about Leone. He was a former holy knight: he knew the truth behind hialar menaces, and he was a warrior with firm convictions. Rafinha’s suddenly bringing up the situation wouldn’t sway him from his path. He was worried about Leone, but he had to face the Prismers. He was caught between a rock and a hard place, and it was clearly eating him up inside, but he couldn’t be swayed from his course.

“Hey, Leon, how about sparring with me instead of Chris? I couldn’t sleep, so I came down here for a workout.”

“Hm? I guess I don’t mind.”

“Thank you! Should we bet something on the results?”

“Like what? Hmm, how about a meal? You eat a lot more than me, so either way you kinda win that one.”

“No, something else. If I win, you get off this ship.”

Understanding Leon’s feelings—you can’t just point them out, you have to give him the excuse he needs, Inglis thought. That’s how to do it. Nice thinking, Rani.

“Ohhh! And if I win?” Leon asked.

“I’ll cry,” Rafinha replied teasingly, sticking her tongue out.

“Hey, c’mon, I don’t wanna be the kind of guy who makes little girls cry.”

Rafinha chuckled. “I believe you won’t be so mean.”

“Uh, Inglis, gimme a hand here or something...”

“In that case, I’ll be the referee,” Inglis offered. “Begin!”

“Hey, hey, c’mon! This is cruel! You’re forcing me into this!” Leon protested. But his expression was an embarrassed grimace, not anger.

“Then, get ready! Here I come!” Facing Leon, Rafinha drew her Artifact bow.



Afterword

First, thank you very much for picking up this book!

So, that's the seventh volume of *Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary Squire* ♀. I hope you enjoyed it. This officially makes this series the longest thing I've written.

I'm grateful enough for that new record, but as has already been announced, it's even getting an anime! I was shocked by the news. I kind of felt, *Are they sure something written by little old me is that big of a deal?* On the other hand, it's something I'm going to remember for the rest of my life, and honestly, I'm just happy and grateful to my readers and to everyone involved with the series. Again, thank you!

I think when I'm on my deathbed, I'll look back to *Reborn to Master the Blade* getting an anime and think that I lived a good life—but it isn't over yet! I'm going to keep doing my best! There's still a lot I want to write, and a lot I have to write for the series, and maybe another series too.

Personally, I think having more than one series going at once is ideal. After all, if you're only working on one, once it's over, no more income. It's important to diversify. Though I think I could also write games or team up with an artist for a comic. I'd like to try those out if anyone's interested.

However, what's most on my mind is one thing: as I mentioned in the afterword last volume, I left my day job as a coder, and I'm going to focus on writing full-time. It just got too busy to focus on both at once. But even doing this full-time, my pace still hasn't come out of the slump it was in when balancing them.

I really want to kick up the pace, so why is this so hard? Probably because when I was my most productive, writing was a cycle, a way to work through all the stress I took home with me. *Where light and dark struggle, the ultimate warrior arises!* or something. But if the darkness became too strong, I wouldn't be able to write anymore. Unable to endure that possibility, I swept the darkness away, yet now the light remains faded...

But, eh, when I was doing that, I was living on three or four hours of sleep a day, and now I'm up to seven or eight. I can feel years being added onto my life. One could say that without office hours or a commute, I'm getting a bit spoiled, but really, I want to find myself a new cycle as a full-time writer.

Finally, I'd like to thank my editor N, the illustrator Nagu, and everyone else involved for their hard work and dedication. This volume's cover art is at least in the top two in the whole series! I immediately right-clicked and set it as my desktop!

Goodbye for now!



“Yes! Slash
them, cut
them, and
mince
them!”

“Eris!
Now!”

Eris

A hialer menace in the service of the Kingdom of Karelia. She comes off as brusque, but she's actually sensitive, if a little awkward.

Ripple

Like Eris, a hialer menace affiliated with the knights. As one of the few demihumans, she has ears and a tail that resemble a dog's.



"A hiral menace?!"

"Come, Arles!"

Rocheftort

A famed general from the enemy country of Venezia. He is feared as the Red Lion for his immense strength.

Arles

A hiral menace in the service of Venezia. Like Ripple, she is demihuman - with ears and a tail that resemble a dog's.

"Yes...
As you wish..."

Raphael

Rafitha's brother, a bold knight who embodies ultimate strength. Serious and, like his sister, he has a strong sense of justice.

Rocheftort called on the lady knight by his side. No, she was something more than a lady knight. She was a demihuman like Ripple was, with the ears and tail of an animal.

“There,
that’s
perfect!
You really
do look
good in
absolutely
everything!
♪ Now turn
around for
me, twirl,
twiiirl! ♪
And give
me a
smile!”

“I love
how cute
this is.
Plus, now
I match
Eris and
Ripple.”

Rafinha

(Rani)

Ingls's childhood friend and Duke Bilford's daughter. She's the only force in the world that can stop Ingls once she gets going.

Ingls

(Chris)

The former hero-king, reborn in the far future as a girl. Hearing of the Prism's resurrection she returns to Karelia's capital, Chiral, but...

Bonus Short Stories

Unexpected Uses

Just after the battle, near the walls of the palace, a knight ushered Inglis and Rafinha toward a dressing room.

“We’ve prepared outfits for you! Right this way!”

“Thank you. Shall we go, Rani?”

“Sure thing, Chris!”

Before they got far, Reddas called out to them. “Ah, wait, Lady Inglis! What shall we do with this dragon tail? Surely you don’t intend to bring it with you to Ahlemin.”

“Hmm, about that... If it’s not too much trouble, perhaps you could bring it to the academy dorms?”

“Yeah. It’ll get in the way here,” Rafinha nodded.

“I think it could come in handy in a lot of ways, but if they can find a use for it, I’d be glad to lend it to them,” Inglis said.

“What is it good for other than eating?” Rafinha asked.

Suddenly, shouts arose from the crater that Inglis had created.

“We’re going over the edge!”

“It’s no use! All hands, abandon ship!”

The waters of Lake Bolt flowed into the crater like a waterfall. When it filled, its vast depth would be hidden away from sight. That solved that problem, but another remained: the Venefic flying battleship which had made a crash landing during Inglis and Rochefort’s battle.

Caught up in the flow of water, it slipped toward the crater. Aboard were not only Venefic soldiers who hadn’t yet abandoned ship but also knights attempting to save them. If the ship sank into the crater, there was no way it could be raised again.

“Ah! Oh no!” Inglis gasped. She thought that, if captured, the ship might still be of use. Letting it sink would be a waste.

She hoisted Fufailbane’s tail over her shoulder, leaped aboard, and gave a powerful swing. “Haaaah!”

The force of the swing was enough to push the ship from the crater’s edge to the shallows. As for the impact...

Krrraaassshhh!

The shock of the tail’s impact against the canal bank sent several

soldiers into the water.

“Aaaaaah!”

“H-Help!”

After swinging the tail, Inglis dived toward the water, forming an ice blade in her hand. Normally, she too would fall in, but she had a plan.

“Freeze!” She plunged the ice blade into the surface of the water, and in an instant it froze, creating a foothold. “Grab this!” Landing there, Inglis held out the dragon tail to the soldiers.

“You saved us!”

“Thanks!”

Once the soldiers overboard grabbed the tail, Inglis planted her feet firmly and gave a shout. “Haaah!” Carrying the tail and the soldiers along with it, she leaped high into the air.

“Whoa!”

Accompanied by the soldiers’ panicked screams, she landed back where she’d begun, near Rafinha and the others. “See? This thing’s good for civil engineering purposes when you need to move a large object, and even as a lifesaver.” Inglis grinned at Rafinha.

“That’s not very helpful when you’re the only one who can swing that thing around!”

“Really? Well, it feels quite pleasant—it’s got a good weight to it, so it’s great for training.” Inglis took a few experimental swings with the tail.

“Aaaaaah!”

“Stooooooooop!”

The soldiers, still clinging on, began to scream again.

“Ah, s-sorry!”

Rafinha tugged at Inglis’s ear. “C’mon, Chris! Knock it off!”

Girlish Romanticism

The *Star Princess* soared toward Ahlemin with Inglis at the controls and Rafinha behind her.

“Rochefort and Arles are lovers, aren’t they?” Rafinha asked as they traveled.

“Seems that way,” Inglis replied. She was already realizing that this wasn’t going to be a fun conversation, so she answered bluntly.

“What, aren’t you curious?”

“We’ve got a big fight coming up, so we need to focus.”

“But we’ve got a while before we get there! It’s fine! Wouldn’t it be boring if we didn’t talk?”

Inglis paused for a moment, wondering how best to phrase what she wanted to say. “Listen, I’m not a very big fan of theirs. They didn’t

just wake up the Prismer—they attacked the palace too.”

“Yes, that’s my point! Rochefort must have known he was doing something terrible, right? And even as beat-up as he was, he wanted to give whatever he had left to Arles. I know they’re our enemy, but I’m still kind of jealous. She must have been happy that he’d go that far for her. Don’t you think so, Chris?”

“Not really. I’d rather someone who would become my foe and fight me than someone who’d fight my foes for me.”

“Wow, that’s so *you*—very direct. I wish you would appreciate romance, though,” Rafinha sighed disappointedly.

“What’s more romantic than the flash of the blade? I’ve always wanted to fight a fully formed Prismer, and now I get to.”

“No, no, that’s not what I meant—”

“I know. But come on, Rani. Those two aren’t anything to look up to, even without their being our enemies.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Well, hial menaces live a long time, right? No matter what, Rochefort will pass away long before Arles. And she’ll have to carry on living, bearing that sadness. There’s no way around it. So there’s more to that relationship than just the devotion you noticed. Even if we manage to pull something off this time, the day might come when they have to face a Prismer too.”

“Ah! So it’s a relationship where they’d have been better off never falling for each other?”

“Yeah. So...”

“That’s great! That passion, that conflict! It’s so romantic!” Rafinha’s eyes glimmered.

“Ha ha ha... Putting it that way is so *you*, Rani.”

“Oh! Th-That’s right!”

“About what?”

“H-Hey, Chris, do Highlanders live as long as normal people?”

“I’ve heard they normally live many times longer.”

“So I’d be an old lady while...? I’m not sure I want that.”

“Yeah. In general, you’re too young for that kind of thing, but a Highlander would be an especially bad choice.” Inglis chuckled.

“What are you so happy about that for?! Though I’m not sure you’re wrong...”

Rin suddenly tapped on Rafinha’s shoulder and furiously shook her head.

“Rin?” Rafinha asked. “You’re shaking your head—do you disagree?”

“C’mon, Rin!” Inglis moaned. “I had her convinced!”

“Chris! Were you trying to trick me?!”

“Full speed ahead! Booster mode!” Accelerating quickly, Inglis did

her best to change the subject.



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Squire ♀ Volume 7
by Hayaken

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Edited by Carly Smith

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